Chapter 4
Discursive Effects of a Paradigm Shift Rhetoric in Online Higher Education: Implications on Networked Learning Research and Practice

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Abstract The aim of this chapter is to critically examine some discursive effects of the 'paradigm shift' rhetoric that is commonly used in the advocacy of online higher education. The chapter will unpack how that particular rhetoric—which permeates *generalist* discourse about online higher education—impacts upon actual distance education practices in *specific* higher education settings, such as 'open universities', where distance education is the core institutional function and where the historical development of practice has been separated from that of 'mainstream' higher education. The chapter focuses on the transition *from* the earlier form of distance education, which was largely associated with and led by dedicated distance universities, *to* the current form of online higher education, which operates and is discussed more and more frequently in mainstream higher education contexts, such as traditional campus-based universities. The particular 'paradigm shift' rhetoric that emerged during that transition will be discussed, and its discursive effects on distance education practices in open universities will be analysed. The main argument is that the rhetoric, as a widespread academic discourse, has generated and continues to perpetuate a 'gap' between learning theories and instructional practices in the open university settings—where current distance education practices have arisen from a unique course of historical development but which are now subjected to 'paradigm shift' rhetoric being imposed from outside. The implications for networked learning research and practice will be discussed, and several suggestions will be made, whereby the networked learning community might develop a more balanced and critical discourse about online higher education.

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Short Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to critically examine some discursive effects of the 'paradigm shift' rhetoric[1] that is commonly used in the advocacy of online higher education (e.g. Harasim 2000; Nachmias 2002). The chapter will unpack how that particular rhetoric—which permeates *generalist* discourse about online higher education—impacts upon actual distance education practices in *specific* higher education settings, such as 'open universities', where distance education is the core institutional function and where the historical development of practice has been separated from that of 'mainstream' higher education. The chapter focuses on the transition *from* the earlier form of distance education, which was largely associated with and led by dedicated distance universities, *to* the current form of online higher education, which operates and is discussed more and more frequently in mainstream higher education contexts, such as traditional campus-based universities. The particular 'paradigm shift' rhetoric that emerged during that transition will be discussed, and its discursive effects on distance education practices in open universities will be analysed. The main argument is that the rhetoric, as a widespread academic discourse, has generated and continues to perpetuate a 'gap' between learning theories and instructional practices in the open university settings—where current distance education practices have arisen from a unique course of historical development but which are now subjected to 'paradigm shift' rhetoric being imposed from outside. The implications for networked learning (NL) research and practice will be discussed, and several suggestions will be made, whereby the NL community might develop a more balanced and critical discourse about online higher education.

To effectively articulate the argument, it is necessary to conceptually separate the notions of distance education (DE) and online higher education (HE). I will first define DE and then differentiate it from the more recent phenomenon of online HE by emphasising two interrelated aspects, namely, its *pedagogical historicity* and *contextual specificity*.

Distance Education and Online Higher Education and Networked Learning

Although 'it is difficult to arrive at one definition' (Schlosser and Simonson 2010, p. 34) and forms of distance education (DE) are varied across diverse educational levels and contexts, there are two shared elements in general DE practice that have long served to distinguish it from conventional, face-to-face education. The first

[1] Rhetoric: The art of effective or persuasive speaking or writing, especially the exploitation of figures of speech and other compositional techniques—language designed to have a persuasive or impressive effect but which is often regarded as lacking in sincerity or meaningful content (Oxford Dictionaries 2016).

component is the separation of teacher and learner, while the second is the use of technological media to unite teacher and learner (Keegan 1996; Moore 1973). In DE practices, teaching and learning activities are *both* technologically mediated and pre-planned through institutional, often 'industrialised', instructional design and production processes (Peters 2007). Unlike online HE, which is a more recently emerged educational phenomenon mainly arisen by the popularisation of the Internet and other ICTs, DE has developed through a long history, during which it has been influenced by a variety of social and political pressures. In fact, the origin of DE dates back to the mid-1800s (Larreamendy-Joerns and Leinhardt 2006). The first US correspondence programme, Anna Eliot Ticknor's *Society to Encourage Studies at Home*, was launched in 1873 (Agassiz 1971; Bergmann 2001), and by the end of the 1800s, a number of correspondence programmes were provided by elite universities (and intellectuals) in both the USA and the UK (Storr 1966).

The Open University of the United Kingdom (UKOU) was established in 1969, and over the subsequent decade, 20 other open universities and autonomous DE institutions were established in around 10 countries, with a particular stated aim: to provide university-level education opportunities to students considered *underserved* by traditional institutions (Perraton 2000). Specialising in distance teaching and DE research, those universities strongly differentiated themselves from campus-based universities and developed institutional identities based on the efficient and cost-effective production and delivery of independent correspondence study programmes, with a strong focus on affordability for students (Guri-Rosenblit 2009; Peters 2008). From its emergence, the academic field of DE research has focused on using a range of technological media to support distance learners, usually in ways driven by perceptions of those learners as underserved or disadvantaged, and DE institutions have extensively concerned themselves with the pedagogical implications of the distance between teachers and learners (Lee 2017). The notion of DE in this chapter consciously embraces that unique *pedagogical historicity*: recognising that the ways in which DE practices have developed and been shaped make them a historical product, which may not be readily changeable.

DE can also be conceptually separated from online HE by considering its *contextual specificity*. DE is a term that narrowly refers to those education practices situated in specific institutional contexts (such as open universities), whereas 'online HE' nowadays more expansively refers to diverse forms of learning and teaching activity mediated or facilitated by ICTs (sometimes only partially) within essentially any HE setting (Edwards 1995; Kanuka and Brooks 2010; Swan 2010). Notwithstanding the distinctions emphasised above, in recent years the advent of online HE has heralded radical changes in the general perception of DE. Previously, in the broader HE discourse, there had been a prevailing perception of DE as a second-rate, peculiar or otherwise abnormal education: mainly due to the lack of direct interaction (i.e. contact) between teachers and learners (Rumble 2001). That lack of interaction was criticised as the 'Achilles' heel' of DE programmes (Hülsmann 2009), and it seems to be a core reason why DE received little attention from general higher educators or educational researchers. Educational (or instructional) technologists, whose emphasis was largely on the educational implementation

of emerging new technologies, also paid little attention to the original DE contexts, where it was more 'affordable' or 'accessible' technologies that tended to be taken up. For example, the personal computer (PC) was, for some time, not considered affordable or accessible even for the general public; while educational technologists were 'early adaptors' ahead of that general public, DE institutions were comparatively cautious due to their focus on programme accessibility and affordability for the 'disadvantaged' or otherwise underserved. Over time, the rapid uptake of PCs and the wide circulation of broadband technologies have increasingly provided the broad population with access to more cost-effective, many-to-many communication tools. In that technological context, the interactive potential of the Internet is increasingly perceived as a driving force behind pedagogical innovation both in DE and in face-to-face instruction (Harasim 2000; Kanuka and Brooks 2010).

The concept of 'online higher education' (i.e. higher education practices mediated or facilitated by ICTs) has rapidly emerged, and it has been repeatedly stated that online HE will bring radically different theoretical and pedagogical approaches into HE practices and so improve them (Adams 2007; Harasim 2000; Swan 2010). It is instructive to consider in detail one specific example anchored in the prevailing discourses of online HE context. In 2000, Harasim published an article entitled *Shift happens: Online education as a new paradigm in learning*, where she drew a clear conceptual boundary between online HE and other forms of HE (for Harasim, DE is conflated into those 'other forms') and sought to provide a comprehensive overview of pedagogical characteristics distinctive to online HE. Harasim argued that, because innovative networking technologies enable many-to-many communication to happen 'any time and any place', even using a small degree of online networking (e.g. e-mail and computer conferencing) would enhance the quality of learning. That argument was taken to be valid in both face-to-face or DE contexts. Importantly, the development of the discourse of online HE has not been led by traditional DE communities; instead, it has been driven by other scholarly communities and business-oriented groups, including those concerned with general HE, private HE provision and innovation in instructional technology. As a result, in this developmental process of conceptualising online HE and its discourses, the unique features of DE (i.e. its pedagogical historicity and contextual specificity) have not been fully considered and discussed. Additionally, the pedagogical differences between online HE and DE practices have come to be somewhat narrowly explained: as a product of the distinctive features of Internet technologies and their advantages in comparison to other DE media (such as postal correspondence, television and radio).

One consequence is that online HE has become conceptualised and characterised as interactive and collaborative due to the communicative features of the Internet, that is, as an innovative form of social learning practice (Garrison and Kanuka 2008). DE, on the other hand, has been conceptualised as being limited to individualised learning practices (Schlosser and Simonson 2010). Consequently, online HE was initially regarded as superior to DE and, over time, has been seen as preferable even to face-to-face education (Garrison and Kanuka 2008). Alongside a gradual proliferation in the educational use of ICTs for supporting connection and collaboration among learners and teachers, different academic communities and theories

have rapidly emerged, developed and sought to obtain academic legitimacy and popularity.[2] Prominent examples are computer-supported collaborative learning (e.g. Dillenbourg et al. 1996; Stahl et al. 2006), *networked learning* (e.g. Goodyear et al. 2004; Dirckinck-Holmfeld et al. 2012) and a range of social constructivist instructional design theories (e.g. Jonassen 1991; Jonassen et al. 1995). The remainder of the chapter considers how those newly emerging and fast-circulating discourses about *general* online HE, which stridently legitimate social constructivist learning approaches and denigrate the more individualistic pedagogical approaches often used in DE, have affected and continue to affect DE practices in *specific* open university contexts. It is important to stress immediately that the aim of the chapter is not to criticise any particular set of learning theories (or the research communities committed to advancing those theories) and nor is it to develop broad claims about the current status of online HE research and practice. Rather, the chapter carefully demonstrates how common assumptions about theoretical and technological development in *general* online HE, which are based on somewhat tacit 'progressive' views of human history, are serving to widen the distance between learning theories and instructional practices in specific DE institutions.

A Theoretical Framework

To elaborate my argument, it is first necessary to clarify the meaning of two important underpinning notions: discourse and theory. Throughout the chapter I follow a Foucauldian conceptualisation of those notions. Foucault's approach to discourse can be distinguished from a more general 'linguistic' approach that focuses on analysing language at the conversational or dialogical levels; instead, discourse in Foucault's works (1985, 1990, 1995) refers to taken-for-granted assumptions or beliefs, which are shared among people in contemporary society or within a particular community (Gee 1996; Hook 2001; Mills 2004). Dominant discourses operate as effective systems of thought within a society: exerting discursive power upon that society by imposing particular ways of thinking, talking and behaving upon its members and, consequently, setting limits on what can be thought, discussed and practised. From this Foucauldian perspective, dominant academic discourse can be effectively understood through the lens of Bourdieu's term *habitus* (Bourdieu 1993). Habitus, in a simple sense, refers to the culture of an academic field—or 'the logic of practices' in the field—which often carries unchallenged or hidden contradictions. That 'culture' or 'logic' produces a 'conditioned and conditional freedom' for members of the academic field, such as researchers (Bourdieu 1990, p. 53). That is, habitus generates 'things to do or not to do, things to say or not to say, in relation to a probable "upcoming" future' (i.e. regulations or possibilities) in a particular academic field—such as the field of philosophy in Bourdieu's own analytic work (Bourdieu 1990, p. 53). In this sense, it can be argued that the habitus of a particular

[2] That issue of popularity will be discussed in more detail later in the chapter.

academic field plays an equivalent role in that research community to the rules that dominant academic discourse plays.

'Theory', in a more traditional sense, can be defined as a set of descriptive, predictive and sometimes prescriptive claims about a certain social phenomenon; its explanatory function helps its users understand their world and so guides their practices in particular ways (Bennett and Oliver 2011; Popper 1963; Trowler 2012). The production of theories is neither straightforward nor explicit—instead, it involves complex disciplinary relations, interests and practices, and the question of 'what is a legitimate theoretical claim?' is usually controlled by dominant discourses in the academic field at the time the theory is under examination. From the perspectives both of Bourdieu (1990) and Foucault (1995), therefore, disciplinary knowledge (i.e. 'theory') is neither objective nor a universal truth; instead, it is a subjective and historical (or social) product created and validated within some particular academic field. Although 'theoretically' theory is supposed to be open to any attempts at refutation, at some point a given theory comes to establish an academic legitimacy, and thereafter it is difficult to challenge or to refute that theory. One reason for that difficulty is that academic practices (e.g. research) are always underpinned by theories, which serve to condition *what* is researched, *how* it is researched and what can be *seen* and *learned* from research (Foucault 1977). To Foucauldian scholars, therefore, it is more important to examine the dominant discourse than to focus on specific aspects of theory itself. The purpose of doing so is to understand 'how and under which conditions has a certain theory emerged and become legitimate' and in doing so to open up certain theoretical assumptions to a process of revalidation.

In the next section, I will elaborate one particular paradigm shift rhetoric in online HE. Thus, I will give a close look at how the paradigm shift discourse shapes other theoretical claims in one academic text (Harasim 2000). That paper provides a useful illustrative example for several reasons. Firstly, the text states some assumptions explicitly that may remain tacit in other published arguments. Secondly, the fact that the paper is published in one of the early volumes of *Internet and Higher Education*, which is regarded as one of the most influential journals in the field of online HE—and is also broadly read by, and contributed to, scholars in other relevant academic circles including general HE and instructional technology—suggests that this text may not only *reflect* but also *influence* dominant discourses in the particular education context. Lastly, focusing on that single academic text at that moment in the argument is a strategic methodological decision to effectively analyse the discourse and its discursive product, which cannot be directly analysed. The aim is to clearly demonstrate, within the limited space in the chapter, how the discourse shapes a number of rhetorical or unproven claims about online HE and its practice. A brief overview of the development of the early DE theories, which is quite different to the common account of the theoretical evolution of online HE (or general online education), will subsequently be deployed. In doing so, the basis of some of Harasim's rhetorical claims will be weakened, while, more broadly, the dominant 'progressive' view of the theoretical and technological development of DE will be brought into question.

A Paradigm Shift Rhetoric in Online Higher Education

In 2000, in an article entitled *Shift happens: Online education as a new paradigm in learning*, Linda Harasim, a Canadian scholar well-known for her writing on online HE, proclaimed that a paradigmatic shift *had happened* in HE. It is worth examining the rhetorical mechanisms by which Harasim seeks to substantiate that assertion.

Affirming online HE as a new paradigm in learning, Harasim begins the article by quoting a short passage from Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1970):

> The proponents of competing paradigms practice their trades in different worlds... Practicing in different worlds [they] see different things when they look from the same point in the same direction... [B]efore they can hope to communicate fully, one group or the other must experience the conversation that we have been calling a paradigm shift. (p. 150 in Harasim 2000)

Subsequently, the article presents an overview of the development of online HE oriented around several historical milestones (such as the invention of the World Wide Web in 1992) and significant 'firsts' in online HE activities that contributed to the paradigmatic shift (such as first totally online course in adult education in 1981 and first online programme for executive education in 1982). She summarises the relatively short history of online HE to the point of writing as follows:

> In its vibrant 25-year history, online [higher] education has tackled tough questions and developed various models to try to understand how new methods of learning and teaching can be *effective, exciting,* and relevant. But while developments in the 1980s and 1990s prepared for a *revolution* in the field of education, most of the *noise* generated in the media questioned the value and quality of online [higher] education and expressed the concerns of some faculty who felt they would be displaced by less well-trained staff. [emphasis added]

In the passage above, Harasim characterises online HE positively as 'a revolution in the field of education', while she describes questions or concerns about online education more negatively, for example, as 'noise'. Throughout her article, Harasim persistently uses progressive words such as 'new' (37 times alongside different nouns such as paradigm, understanding, approach, modes, forms, methods, etc.), 'change' (17 times) and 'shift' (16 times) to emphasise how online HE is fundamentally and paradigmatically different from traditional face-to-face HE and DE. Harasim's favourable attitude towards online HE is also explicit in her linguistic deployment of the terms 'effective' and 'exciting', used to characterise those pedagogical changes in HE facilitated by the adoption of ICTs. While many readers will no doubt readily recognise such rhetoric, it is worth emphasising that this positive attitude towards online HE commonly appears in other literature on online education published around the same time as Harasim's article (cf. Clark 2001; Huang 2002; Kekkonen-Moneta and Moneta, 2002).[3]

[3] For example, Clark (2001) discussed the advantages of online learning environments to provide more learner-centred learning experiences by stimulating learner collaboration and discussion, and

Harasim's article defines online HE education rather expansively: as 'new modes of educational delivery, new learning domains, new principles of learning, new learning processes and outcomes, and new educational roles and entities' (p. 45). The following passage from the article clearly separates online HE from DE:

> Online education is not the same as distance education, although it shares some of the same attitudes. Both are any place, any time, and largely text-based. However, the critical differentiating factor is that online education is fundamentally a *group communication* phenomenon. In this respect, it is far closer to *face-to-face* seminar-type courses. (p. 49–50) [emphasis added]

By contrasting two pedagogical approaches that higher educators have adopted when implementing ICTs in their instructional practices, Harasim again stresses the essence of the 'new learning paradigm' in online HE, by which is meant some form of 'collaborative' or 'constructivist' learning:

> Ironically, the technological solutions provided by the Web also introduced new problems or exacerbated existing ones [...] Two basic models of online courses thus emerged: one based on collaborative learning and interaction, and the other based on publishing information online [...] The second, based on *the old model of transmission of information* or *lecture mode* seemed to flourish during the late 1990s, but then its weaknesses became evident. At the same time, new tools and environments customized for education based on educational interaction and collaboration were emerging. (p. 52) [emphasis added]

This passage clearly implies the recognition that the learning paradigm shift in HE is much more complex than simply adopting ICTs. Harasim next advocates, therefore, a collective effort to 'intentionally' shape the paradigmatic shift in HE and transform HE practices, through designing online courses based on the pedagogical principles suggested by this new learning paradigm:

> Humans have experienced several paradigmatic shifts, but they have never intentionally shaped them. Today, we have the unique opportunity and responsibility to engage in designing, at least to some degree, the world that we, and future generations, will inhabit. (p.52)

Seemingly, such a call seems to indicate that, in fact, the paradigm has not yet shifted—so inevitably calling into question the validity of Harasim's earlier claim that online education has shifted the learning paradigm in HE. Nevertheless, without explicitly addressing those contradictions, Harasim goes on to reinforce her earlier argument: by presenting a large set of empirical data collected from her own research project on the *Virtual-U*, one of the first Web-based learning environments in which over 15,000 students and 220 instructors participated in over 439 courses in 1999. Harasim mentions that 100% of Virtual-U courses incorporated some form of networking and collaborative learning activities, argues that students actively participated in those activities and then claims that these courses produced entirely new learning patterns in HE. Based on similar descriptive data from the same project, Harasim further insists that students in online course produce more personally meaningful knowledge by collaborating in groups; the implication she seeks to

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Kekkonen-Moneta and Moneta (2002) presented their comparative case study result that suggests online education fosters higher-order learning compared to lecture.

draw is that the educational role of online instructors is not to provide knowledge but to facilitate the process of collaborative knowledge construction among students. In her conclusion, Harasim reaffirms that the learning paradigm shift 'happens' as online education *matures* in HE and that, as a result, traditional learning and teaching processes and outcomes are transformed into new ones based on a new paradigm of *collaborative networked learning*:

> The convergence of the computer network revolution with profound social and economic changes has led to a transformation of education at all levels. The new paradigm of collaborative networked learning is evident in the new modes of course delivery being offered, in the educational principles that frame the educational offerings, the new attributes that shape both the pedagogies and the environments that support them and that yield new educational processes and outcomes. (p. 59)

Notwithstanding the dubious consistency of the argument about paradigmatic change, since 2000 this article has been continuously cited—thus amplifying Harasim's impetuous conclusion and normative claims through repetition and reinforcement throughout much other literature concerned with online HE. For example, Nachmias (2002) cites the above excerpt from Harasim's conclusion when he proposes a research framework for Web-based instruction that includes a research focus on 'shifts and paradigmatic changes in pedagogical practice resulting from the implementation of the new technologies' (p. 215). Daly et al. (2004), in their article about teacher learning, also use Harasim's explanation about the close relationship between a new learning paradigm and new communication technologies, on the basis of which they argue that teachers need to transform their pedagogies alongside the current educational changes facilitated by the new learning perspectives and technologies. Papastergiou (2006), similarly, cites Harasim's article along with several other online education 'pioneers'. She does so as part of an argument stating that ICT technologies support the implementation of a social constructivist approach to learning, which they do by providing communication and knowledge sharing tools and thereby 'enabling the creation of online learning communities for construction of shared knowledge across barriers of space and time' (p. 595). Papastergiou goes on to argue that those technologies can transform the traditional educational processes of HE and to claim that applying constructivist learning approaches in face-to-face instruction is difficult, if not impossible, without using ICTs.

As mentioned earlier in the introduction, this chapter seeks to position such claims about the 'paradigm shift' more critically: as one of several rhetorical but dominant academic discourses that have discursive effects, in particular of widening the gap between learning theories and instructional practice in particular DE institutions. To further that argument in light of the analysis of Harasim's paper, it is instructive to highlight the Kuhnian notion of *paradigm* on which Harasim draws and to contextualise it within the theoretical framework of this study. Kuhn's original notion of *paradigm* is, in fact, closely related to Foucault's concept of *discourse*—i.e. a system of thoughts that decides legitimate knowledge, thoughts and statements in each society—as well as to Bourdieu's term *habitus*, which decides a logic of practices in an academic community. Kuhn (1970) uses the term *paradigm*

to refer to a system of inquiry shared by the members of a certain scientific community: the 'sets of rules and standards about truth—what is to be studied, why, and how' (Popkewitz and Brennan 1997, p. 300). That is, paradigmatic understandings decide whether a certain inquiry will be considered scientific or not. Kuhn's account of paradigm *shifts*, moreover, focuses on *incommensurable* differences between old and new paradigms.

Kuhn's (1970) argument denies the absoluteness of a single paradigm but instead illustrates that a multiplicity of paradigms contest fields of science at any given moment. In other words, scientific communities with different paradigms pursue their investigations in different, or even conflicting, ways at the same historical moment. Similarly, from a Foucauldian perspective, there are always multiple 'competing' discourses in a particular society, among which it is the *dominant* discourse that regulates the production of legitimate knowledge and the members' practices (Foucault 1995). Note how both the Kuhnian and Foucauldian arguments suggest that the emergence of a new paradigm does not necessarily mean that other discourses, including previously dominant ones, immediately fade away and entirely lose their discursive power within the given society. A paradigmatic shift in science, in fact, does not simply happen by the birth of a new paradigm or the advent of an individual theory, but it involves a series of phases in which the new paradigm is transformed into dominant normal science (Kuhn 1970). From this perspective, the Kuhnian paradigm 'shift' can be understood as congruent with a Foucauldian focus on 'discontinuity' or 'rupture' in social history (Foucault 1985). Neither a shift nor a rupture takes place under a certain social group's direction to change through intentional planning; instead, these events emerge from complex discourse and knowledge relations and developmental phases.

Paradoxically, however, the way in which the term paradigm shift has migrated into broader social sciences is in line with the usage highlighted in the above analysis: it is often used as a prescriptive notion that implies a volitional change, contrasting with Kuhn's original definition of paradigmatic change. Stickney (2006), for example, observes that *paradigm shift*, as a discourse in teacher education, is often rhetorically associated with descriptions of global, societal trends and that it is frequently used on that basis to legitimise authoritarian educational policies or to normatively legitimate campaigns within the local level of school context. Stickney further argues that the paradigm shift rhetoric is misused in diverse school reform projects, where it is utilised as a powerful tool to force teachers to develop a unified identity—as change agents who actively and collectively participate to realise top-down reform initiatives in their schools. Interestingly, in this context, the notion of paradigm shift has itself, in turn, seemingly become a dominant discourse leading educational change and exerting influence upon teachers' beliefs and practices.

Harasim's work provides a useful illustrative example of how Kuhn's concept of paradigm (or paradigm shift) has lost its original legitimacy and rather become adopted as a legitimating rhetoric in online HE. Crudely used, that rhetoric contributes to the oversimplification of complex changes in social practice whose genesis is multifaceted, that is, influenced by multiple factors at different contextual levels, both at local and global level. In the present example, the paradigm shift rhetoric, in

the process of unsophisticatedly contrasting DE as old learning paradigm (one that is teacher-centred and non-interactive) and online HE as new paradigm (one that is learner-centred and interactive), fails to consider the pedagogical historicity and contextual specificity of DE. Paradigm as a rhetorical academic discourse has lost its descriptive power; instead, it exerts a discursive power by prescribing right, effective or legitimate ways of designing online courses and being an online instructor.

A Distance Between Theories and Practices

As mentioned earlier, this chapter analyses the discursive effects of the paradigm shift rhetoric on DE practices in specialist 'open university' settings. The previous section illustrated how paradigm shift rhetoric generates certain pedagogical and theoretical claims about online HE—ones that, among other things, raise the status of collaborative and constructive learning theories and disparage 'old' pedagogical approaches to DE. Building on that foundation, the present section problematises 'progressive' assumptions about the historical development of online HE theories, which are commonly advocated as some sort of 'evolution' in general learning theories. Against that general 'evolutionary' view, the section counterposes, once more, the divergent contextual specificity and pedagogical historicity of DE theory and practice.

Let us begin by considering how the 'historical development' of learning theories is typically presented in accounts of online HE. Once again, the account is congruent with the work of Harasim (2012), but analogous accounts can easily be found elsewhere in the literature (e.g. Koschmann 1996; Swan 2005). Jones's (2015) work, concerning a development of NL research in post-compulsory level, also provides a good summary of the general theories of learning, which is complemented by some of the alternative views of learning.

How people learn has always been an important question in education; it is assumed that only if we know how people learn are we able to teach them or to effectively design learning experiences (Bransford et al. 2000). At present, the dominant bodies of literature on online HE literature largely follow a broadly constructivist understanding of how people learn—regarding learning as 'an active process of constructing rather than acquiring knowledge, and instruction is a process of supporting that construction rather than communicating knowledge' (Duffy and Cunningham 1996).

Not very long ago, however, behaviourist learning theories (e.g. Skinner' programmed instruction) and cognitivist learning theories (e.g. Wittrock's generative learning model) dominated most education contexts. Skinner in his article, *The science of learning and the art of teaching* published in 1954, argued that programmed instructional materials should include small steps of desirable behaviour changes, ask frequent questions and offer immediate feedback and allow for individual self-paced approaches. He also advocated that the aversive, oppressive and often corporal

behaviour control techniques prevalent in his time be replaced by 'scientific methods', such as the systematic analysis of learning and the optimal arrangement of reinforcement for desired behaviour. Behaviourist learning theorists (e.g. Watson, Thorndike and Skinner) focused on making instruction individually tailored and designed to maximise its instructional 'effectiveness': that is, to provoke positive behavioural changes (Harasim 2012). Later, Wittrock's (1992) generative learning model defined learning as acquisition of factual information and suggested that people learn new knowledge by generating connections between new information and their prior knowledge. Cognitivist learning theorists were interested in learners' internal mental process of knowledge acquisition, based on various information-processing models (Harasim 2012). From the vantage point of this cognitivist learning approach, effective teaching provides a learning task meaningful to individual learners and carefully organises and presents materials as ordered chunks: ordered from simple to complex and so as to build on prior memory.

During the period of the 1990s–2000s, there was an important pedagogical change in general education contexts: a move from cognitivism to constructivism (Bruner 1986; Piaget 1973; Von Glasersfeld 1984; Vygotsky 1978). This transition is mostly explained with respect to an epistemological or philosophical shift from objectivism to constructivism (e.g. Jonassen 1991; Swan 2005; Vrasidas 2000). In this account, whereas objectivists believe that the world is structured and knowledge is objective and external to the knower, constructivists argue that the world is constructed in each individual's mind and knowledge is subjective. That is, constructivist learning theories are fundamentally based on constructivist views about knowledge and knowing. The core ideas of constructivist learning theories are that i) when we encounter a new idea or experience, we either assimilate it into our existing knowledge or accommodate it by restructuring and developing our previous framework of understanding (Piaget 1973), and that ii) people construct their own understanding of the world through interacting with their environments and creating meaning from personal experiences (Vygotsky 1978). Learning—an active process of constructing knowledge by interacting with other people and environments—is, therefore, not an individual process but a social practice (Wenger 1998).

In parallel, the development of instructional technologies has been taken as an opportunity for the theorising of social learning or collaborative learning, with a focus on how to design constructivist learning environments and support students within them (Hillman et al. 1994; Koschmann 1996; Paavola et al. 2004). To cite one example, social constructivist learning environments are set up as being those that 'engage learners in knowledge construction through collaborative activities that embed learning in a meaningful context and through reflection on what has been learned through conversation with other learners' (Jonassen et al. 1995, p. 12). Thus, it is suggested that teachers and instructional designers might focus on developing interactive and collaborative environments rather than controlling behaviours and outcomes and prescribing information into sequences (Swan 2005). For example, Garrison and Anderson (2003) propose the *Community of Inquiry* model whose three key factors are environmental: designing for cognitive presence, social presence and teaching presence. This model does not suggest a prescriptive or procedural

approach to instructional design but identifies particular instructional strategies and teaching behaviours that might foster the development of 'community' among learners. Scardamalia and Bereiter's (1994) *knowledge building* framework, similarly, conceptualises learning as a collaborative knowledge building process and carries the implication that a focus of education for the knowledge age should be to engage children in that knowledge building process. Scardamalia (2002) identified 12 principles of knowledge building that might comprise successful collective inquiry processes and suggested that teachers become guides or facilitators, allowing students to have a collective responsibility, as a knowledge building community, for their own learning.

From a broader theoretical perspective, the *computer-supported collaborative learning* (CSCL) research community has been committed to advancing collaborative learning theories from its inception. That group of researchers have tried to better understand 'how people can learn together with the help of computers' (Stahl et al. 2006, p. 409) and how to design technologies to support learners' collective meaning making or knowledge building processes (e.g. Dillenbourg et al. 1996; Scardamalia and Bereiter 1994). *Networked learning* (NL), which is defined as 'learning in which information and communication technology is used to promote connections: between one learner and other learners, between learners and tutors; between a learning community and its learning resources' (Goodyear et al. 2004, p. 1), is another research community that shares with CSCL a commitment to collective collaboration in learning (Jones 2015). It is within that same general historical narrative of the development of learning theories that the current ideas and approaches prevailing in the academic field of 'online HE' are also deeply situated. As shown in the preceding section, online HE is commonly associated with the 'new' constructivist learning paradigm, whereas 'other' forms of DE are devalued on the basis that they are based on 'old' paradigms such as behaviourism, cognitivism or objectivist epistemological views. It is my intention here to briefly present a different narrative about the theoretical development of DE—to problematise the oversimplified conceptual boundaries between online HE and DE, which may be caused by the 'progressive' views of a one-directional move from ignorance to enlightenment, a move which has already been critiqued by other thinkers with regard to other fields[4] (e.g. Foucault 1995).

Early scholars in DE (e.g. Charles A. Wedemeyer and Michael G. Moore in the USA, Börje Holmberg in Sweden, Otto Peters in Germany) were concerned to formulate instructional models for independent correspondence study, augmented by different communication media (such as telephone tutoring). Because learning in correspondence study programmes is fundamentally organised around

[4] In a relevant field of educational technology, such critique of the progressivism often appears as a form of counter-arguments or criticisms against 'technological determinism or essentialism' as well as blind 'enthusiasm or boosterism' towards new technologies (e.g. Jones 2015; Selwyn 2013). Although these critiques will not be directly discussed in this chapter in order to closely maintain my focus on the paradigm shift rhetoric, it is worth noting that these critiques provide meaningful insights for understanding the present problem in this chapter in a broader and deeper sense.

knowledge-transmitting or broadcasting activities targeted towards individual learners, who independently complete guided reading or other exercises, it is often associated with the behaviourist-cognitivist learning theories (e.g. Anderson and Dron 2011; Jonassen et al. 1995). However, counterintuitively, the original DE instructional models devised in the 1960s–1970s did not take their inspiration from the popular behaviourist paradigms of that time. Instead, many essential elements of early DE models emerged from quite separate analyses of unique and inherent contextual characteristics of DE practices. For example, the industrial production model for DE of Peters (1967) arose from a practice-oriented recognition that, in DE, all teaching and learning materials and activities need to be carefully planned, organised and clearly presented before courses are provided to students. Peters (1967) took inspiration from industrial production, applying analogous insights and techniques (about formalised divisions of labour, mechanisation, mass production, economies of scale and so on) into DE production and delivery processes, for the purposes of increasing both cost-effectiveness and teaching effectiveness. Peters' model was perceived as having great practical utility to DE contexts, and it was on that basis that it was taken up as an organisational model for many DE institutions, including the Open University in the United Kingdom, and indeed it is still utilised in many DE institutions (Garrison 2000).

In addition, it should be recognised that distance learners in early correspondence study programmes were mostly adults with limited access to face-to-face HE. Therefore, many of the critical elements of the early instructional models (e.g. autonomy, dialogue, structure) took more inspiration from the instructional design practices of 'adult education' (i.e. andragogy in Knowles 1985), rather than the behaviourist-cognitivist learning theories being discussed across formal education settings, including both K-12 and HE (Anderson 2013; Moore 2013). The adult education literature is the foundation, for example, of Wedemeyer's (1981) independent study model, which emphasises student-centred or self-directed learning. It is also closely connected to Holmberg's teaching-learning conversation model—originally a guided didactic conversation model—which emphasises relational qualities and promotes the view that 'feelings of personal empathy and personal relations between learner and teacher support motivation for leaning and tend to improve the results of learning' (Holmberg 2007, p. 69). Building upon Wedemeyer's independent study model, Moore (1990) developed the theory of transactional distance, which seeks to illustrate the relationships between three instructional components: course structure, teacher-learning dialogue and learner autonomy. According to that model, DE can be retrospectively seen as providing experiences aligned simultaneously with behaviourism, cognitivism *and* constructivism learning, with the divergence of emphasis located around the particular difference in transactional distance in the situation (Moore 2013).

Although several technologies (such as TV and radio) had been introduced and utilised to augment teaching effectiveness, DE practices remained largely wedded to independent correspondence study and industrial production models until the 1990s. In the early 2000s, the rapid development of ICTs and their educational applications started to be seen by DE institutions as providing opportunities for

improving, although not necessarily revolutionising, their DE practices. At the same time, however, this situation resulted in a rapid increase in the size of the online HE enterprise, which began to be perceived by many social groups as attractive marketable commodities (Harting and Erthal 2005), and subsequently, new online HE providers (competitors from the DE institutions' perspective) emerged: such as online universities using advanced ICT infrastructures and aggressive marketing strategies and well-known campus-based universities starting to provide more programmes online. In this context, the growing scholarly emphasis on constructivist-informed pedagogical practices began to exert pressure on DE institutions for adopting new models of instructional production and delivery (Ice 2010). Yet, since that time, large DE institutions, including many open universities, have experienced a noticeably *slower* adoption of ICTs—compared to the new online HE providers that originated in the Internet era—and DE institutions have particularly struggled to implement social constructivist learning paradigms (Bates 2008).

One critical barrier to technological and pedagogical change that DE institutions have experienced is related to their adherence to the *cost-effectiveness* principle, set out earlier in the chapter. Since their development, DE institutions have gained cost advantages by using particular pedagogical models and affordable technological media, with the ultimate aim of providing access to the disadvantaged (Hülsmann 2009; Perraton 2000; Rumble 2004; Woodley 2008). For that reason, the issue of the growing digital divide has been extensively discussed in open university contexts, even while it has been far less salient in general HE discourse (Guri-Rosenblit 2009). The focus of that discussion is the question of who benefits and who is marginalised when educational institutions adopt ICTs. On the basis that there has been a large group of people in both developed and developing worlds who do not have access to the Internet—a situation which remains true down to the present—distance educators have tended to take a principled stance that moving towards online delivery might necessarily reduce the accessibility of DE (Bolger 2009; McKeown et al. 2007).

In addition, it is worth emphasising that the forms of practice prevalent in DE continue to be influenced by quite different contextual situations from those prevalent in much traditional HE teaching. In particular, social learning theories tend to carry assumptions about class sizes, students' ability and willingness to undertake active collaboration and tutors' quasi-autonomous organising and facilitating skills that seem incommensurable with the standard practices of DE from the point of view of its practitioners. Even if implemented, the likely implication would be an increase in the cost of DE to students and a simultaneous decrease in the degree of flexibility of programme delivery and learner independence, which are typically considered essential for successful DE practice (Holmberg 1995). Those arguments have been explicitly made in the DE literature. For example, Battalio (2007) argues that distance learners, with their many other responsibilities, may be unable to devote the time required for collaborative learning components and that they might therefore prefer the structure of traditional 'independent' DE to that of online 'collaborative' HE. In a similar vein, it has been suggested that those who are already well-prepared (with a high academic language level) and well-connected (having

access to the Internet) are those most likely to benefit from online HE (Spronk 2001). It has been a source of persistent regret that 'DE [has] faded into the mainstream and the World Wide Web [has] failed to provide worldwide learning as had been hoped' (Baggaley 2008, p. 49) and also that in online HE only particular 'slices of the population [are] being included and other more substantial slices being excluded' (Bolger 2009, p. 305). Kanuka and Brooks (2010), having set out an argument of that nature, conclude that, in DE contexts, the three components of interactive learning, flexible access and cost-effectiveness cannot be achieved in the same DE programme all at once. As a consequence of that specialist discourse, distance educators tend to narrowly perceive ICTs as either a tool for advanced, independent and personalised learning or as a mechanism for facilitating extended access to educational materials, rather than as a tool for interactive social learning (Garrison and Cleveland-Innes 2010; Harris 2008; Peters 2003).

Discussions: Implications on Networked Learning Research and Practice

The development of ICT and its appropriation within educational contexts has provided educators with numerous opportunities for altering their practice—though the extent to which those opportunities have been recognised, realised or even desired is a matter for debate. Online HE is certainly one of the many opportunities via which the adoption of new technologies has brought about significant changes in HE practice, though the extent to which it has realised the pedagogical potential of the Internet and achieved more radical forms of across-the-board innovation in HE is, again, a matter for debate. The innate aspiration for *radical*, technology-based pedagogical change in the field of online HE has inevitably produced many academic discourses that boost and promote new ways of thinking, talking and acting among their adherents and that aim to influence all higher educators. The paradigm shift rhetoric in this chapter is one example of those dominant academic discourses serving a progressive purpose in the field: one that has normalised and legitimated a new pedagogical approach, based on constructivist learning theories, by setting up that approach as opposed against the 'old', by which means behaviourist-cognitivist learning theories. This type of legitimating rhetoric constitutes the habitus in the field of online HE at the present moment. It generates and circulates particular academic norms and rules that determine what research questions, theoretical frameworks, research methodologies and even research findings are legitimate: that is, the rhetoric conditions research practices and academic discussion in the field.

In order to achieve its aims—which resemble, in an evangelical missionary manner, an objective to move HE into some 'sacred' place—the academic community of online HE has extensively focused on generating one single belief that can guide online HE practices. In the course of effectively articulating a normative direction of movement, the projected discourse in that field has tended to overgeneralise online HE practice (i.e. pedagogical activities mediated by ICTs) and to oversimplify the advocated change (i.e. a move from behaviourism-cognitivism to constructivism).

One consequence is, I suggest in this chapter, that the rhetoric of the field has served to dismiss the diversity of the form and valid historical origins of online HE, the complexity of pedagogical change and the specificity of each online HE context (where the prescribed change may be appropriate or not). In other words, the academic field—by projecting a dichotomised conceptualisation of DE as the 'old', ineffective and to be discarded and online HE as the 'new', effective and desirable—has failed to embrace the pedagogical historicity and contextual specificity of DE. Another consequence is that many open universities[5] have adopted the Internet as an instructional medium without managing to bring about radical changes in their pedagogical principles. As a result, in many open university contexts, there has been an increasing gap between those theoretical ideals being advocated from outside and the mundane pedagogical practices, which have arisen from a unique course of historical development and which have proven not so readily changeable. Nevertheless, this theory-practice gap has not obtained much scholarly attention from HE researchers, whose academic works tend to be regulated by those dominant discourses that have caused the problem in the first place.

At this moment the NL community, having relatively mature theoretical ideas and ample evidence of successful empirical interventions in particular settings, is taking the opportunity to be reflective upon our own practice. The title of the present volume, *Networked Learning: Looking Back – Moving Forward*, is one indicator of that. In that vein, the present chapter seeks to highlight one neglected type of research site whose experiences and narrative differ substantially from those prevalent within the NL community. Accounting for the gap highlighted in this chapter will involve carefully unpacking some of the taken-for-granted assumptions underlying our research practices, thereby perhaps to some extent (re-)developing our scholarly identity as a community. While NL is sometimes understood externally as simply a common theoretical framework pertinent to the understanding of online HE contexts, NL as a community has at least two distinctive merits compared to other scholarly groups in that landscape (such as CSCL). I will argue that those unique characteristics, which the community has maintained and developed throughout its history, provide the potential for NL to serve as a particularly useful vehicle to address the issues discussed in the chapter.

The first merit I wish to highlight relates to the scope and focus of NL research. The NL community has originally emerged from, and has mainly focused on, the post-compulsory education contexts specifically. As one of its 'founding documents', *Towards E-Quality in Networked E-Learning in Higher Education: A Manifesto Statement for Debate* (2002)[6] articulates that the vision of the NL community is 'of a higher education where access and connection are championed and where lifelong learning is truly and effectively supported'. Even though there are some similar rhetorical claims that can be found in many other documents of a similar type, generated by other communities in online HE (such as a great emphasis on

[5] An empirical study on one open university in Canada concerning the same problem is presented in my doctoral dissertation (Lee 2015).

[6] This document was produced for the ESRC research seminar series, entitled Understanding the Implications of Networked Learning for HE.

collaboration and co-construction of knowledge and subsequent claims about the relationship between teachers and learners), the manifesto clearly demonstrates that the community's shared concern lies in the accessibility and quality of HE.[7] Given that the NL community has already established considerable in-depth knowledge and expertise on the general HE sector and its underlying mechanisms, I would argue that it is a good moment for the community to turn its attention to more specific, and perhaps more challenging, HE contexts: ones for which NL has not hitherto been considered an appropriate pedagogical approach. In addition, given its long-held concern with the accessibility of HE, NL is well-placed to consider the context-specific and historically emergent practices of DE. In other words, there is more potential for the development of joint understanding between the NL research community and DE practitioners than between the latter and other communities of more evangelical researchers.

The second merit I wish to highlight, then, concerns the nature of NL as a conscious, self-organised research community. NL as a community has strived to maintain and remember (to remind its members) a unique identity and culture based around the notion of *critical scholarship*. One example of how that identity is articulated can be found in McConnell, Hodgson and Dirckinck-Holmfeld's (2012) historical overview of the community:

> The development of networked learning has largely been influenced by understanding of developments in technology to support learning alongside thinking stemming from the traditions of open learning and other radical pedagogical and humanistic educational ideas from the likes of Dewey, Freire, Giroux, and Rogers. (p. 4)

Two points can be discerned within that account. Firstly, NL is not a single theoretical unity, and secondly, the NL community has not been constituted as being about the imposition of a particular pedagogical standpoint; instead, the community has tried to welcome and open diverse alterative theoretical or conceptual ideas including overtly critical ones (see also Jones 2015). One natural consequence of those points is that the community has had a laudable awareness of the complexity of social change, the implications of political agendas and the diverse motivations driving particular pedagogical changes: 'implementing pedagogical changes and institutional learning environments is always a political process first and only secondly pedagogical' (Hodgson et al. 2014, p. 7). From this perspective, I argue that the NL community can consciously choose to avoid being polluted by the dominant rhetoric of online HE but, instead, to critically question these commonly held assumptions in online HE. Consequently, we as a community should seek to collectively generate more balanced and nuanced discourses of online HE, which can overcome the unhelpful conceptual dichotomy between the old DE and the new online HE. Of course, one prerequisite for that critical task is for the NL research community to consciously reconsider some of its taken-for-granted assumptions.

[7] It is important to note that, in recent years, NL practices have been changing and expanding into diverse formal and informal educational settings and are no longer circumscribed to the context of HE (see Carvalho and Goodyear 2014; Ryberg and Sinclair 2016).

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