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REFLECTION

Thesis and antithesis

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Behind every educational concept an opposing notion is waiting for recognition. Despite their avowed objectives, however, academic debates do not always encourage the discussion of opposing views. A review of sessions at the December 2011 Online Educa Conference illustrates that point and others about academic meetings. Opposing viewpoints may be valid in specific situations and eras, however, and dynamic shifts between opposing views can be justified. For example, the recently argued notion of connectivism, while amply predated in the educational literature, has been timely in indicating the current need for reassessment of asynchronous educational methods. Meanwhile its logical nemesis, disconnectivism, awaits a timely moment to be proposed. The article suggests that these two polar opposites could justify one another as a psychological continuum of learning activity, while distinguishing connectivism from the earlier cybernetic theories of Gordon Pask.

Keywords: connectivism; disconnectivism; conversation theory; interactions of actors theory; Online Educa 2011

Subject matter and anti-matter

This reflection was stimulated by a comment in an in-flight magazine by the German actor Ulrich Tabor. The interviewer asked, "You often describe yourself as an asynchronous person. Is that psychospeak for old-fashioned?" The actor answered:

> What I mean is that I don't always feel constrained by the reality surrounding me. Even as a child, I used to seek out parallel worlds that seemed like better places to hang out. (Schophaus, 2011, p. 50)

This exchange raises issues for contemporary distance education. Does the interviewer imply that asynchronous communication is now outdated? Online educators whose courses rely on asynchronous text-based conferencing might not support that view. In response, Tabor speaks eloquently of the value of disconnecting himself from others in order to discover new levels of his craft. Having recently written a book for the Routledge Open and Flexible Learning series (Baggaley, 2011b), I can attest to that. I cut myself off from the outside world for two months to write it, and I learned more about my topic in disconnected isolation than I believe I had learned from connecting with others on the topic over several years.

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It feels quite easy to go underground if one doesn't have a Facebook account or a blog to maintain, and if one never sends a tweet from one's Twitter account. My 2011 book encourages the use of synchronous conferencing in online education, and implies that the "asynchronous years" of distance education are gradually fading. On the other hand, I refuse to allow my personal life to be dictated by social networking priorities, synchronous or otherwise, and I strongly prefer asynchronous dealings when they are more convenient than instant responses. There is quite enough to do in maintaining email with people in maybe six countries before lunch, rather than spending time making regular online commentaries. A good outcome of that approach is that I have never yet kept anyone waiting for social media updates about my times and thoughts, because I've never entered into a social media agreement with anyone.

So there is a case to be made for connectivism, and another for disconnectivism, if one wished to propose it formally. The US newscaster Brian Williams proves that disconnectedness can actually be quite impressive. At the time of writing, his Twitter account has 75,000 followers, and yet he has never tweeted (Williams, 2011). The problem with recommending disconnectivism as an academic construct, however, would be that one would soon become mired in politics with academics who regarded your idea as critical of theirs. That would not necessarily be the case, for the two notions can be perfectly compatible. For every subject matter a logical antimatter is probable, each position being valid in different situations.

Raising but not discussing

The discussion and resolution of opposing views is, of course, a major objective of academic meetings. Unfortunately, as Thouless' 1953 classic *Straight and Crooked Thinking* points out, even the most learned gatherings do not always provide this opportunity. For example, the opening comments at the 2011 Online Educa Conference in Berlin quite angrily denounced the words "teaching" and "global." The commentator, Talal Abu-Ghazaleh of the Talal Abu-Ghazaleh Organization, went on to use the same words himself a few minutes later (2011c), although his intended message seemed clear—that one should renounce old-fashioned leanings towards teaching and global issues, adopting instead exclusive emphases on learning and local topics. Any suggestion that one might seek useful interactions between teaching and learning, global and local, seemed to be ruled out by this emphatic approach, which saw learning as a Good Thing—in the witty words of Seller and Yeatman in *1066 and All That* (1967)—and teaching as a Bad Thing. (The subtitle to that simplified version of British history, it may be remembered, was *103 Good Things, 5 Bad Kings and 2 Genuine Dates*.)

Two days before the Berlin conference, Talal Abu-Ghazaleh (2011b) had made the same points and denounced the same terms in a speech to the Bosphorus Conference on Regional Cooperation, supporting regional rather than global approaches. By contrast, a week earlier (Abu-Ghazaleh, 2011a), he had stated at a family business workshop in Amman: "Let your tendency be global. Be global, think globally, behave globally and abide by global requirements." Presumably, this commentator perceives the need to shift dynamically between opposing messages in different situations, in which case his tolerance for ambiguity is to be applauded. It would have been useful, however, for the Online Educa audience to have had a chance to ask him to justify his opposing views in relation to teaching and learning.

Sometimes, academic discussions are not even structured in a manner that permits such debate. The Berlin conference, for example, demonstrated this point in its scheduling of two parallel sessions: "Evolving a Learning Culture" and "Developing Performance Culture." The first stressed the learner's role in, and need to take ownership of, the educational process. The second addressed the current "clear shift" from "learning" to "performance" (Online Educa, 2011), an analysis that seemed to set the first approach on its ear. If these opposing semantics could have been debated in some kind of Socratic dialogue, an exciting new notion might have evolved about the justification for shifting between emphases in different conditions; but the Berlin schedule, implying it was an either/or issue, kept the Learning and Performance advocates apart in different meeting rooms.

Other Online Educa sessions debated distinctions between competence and competency, the need to train people to be competent, and old emphases on the need for context as well as content, for change to come from the inside, and on the perennial importance of "the human factor." If the problems of the educational process could truly be addressed on such simplistic bases, providing reminders about clichéd ideas might be worthwhile. It seems that many people prefer their ideas to be kept uncomplicated, however, and even repetitive. The notion that educational problems can readily be resolved by investing in a simple solution is also supported by the corporate kiosks at today's massive educational events. One sees this mindset in the kiosk banners, with their similar messages urging new foci on learning, connecting, taking ownership, and so on, expressed by the simplest and catchiest slogans possible.

This is not to suggest that Online Educa is the only academic event at which complex educational issues are occasionally oversimplified. One cannot generalize about this tendency in an event with over 2000 delegates, at which countless valuable interactions occur. It is merely useful to check whether or not these old academic problems are still current. I did hear one welcome comment at the Berlin meeting, however. A session chairman held his head in his hands and declared that he fears education and discussions of it have lost their soul. I would have liked to clasp him by the hand to show him he is not alone in that conclusion. The essence of soulfulness is depth of feeling and complexity, and the academic attempt to reduce leads directly to loss of soul. For every -ism there is an anti-ism, and the conflicting emphases they create may be valid in different circumstances. The problem is often not so much the -ism nor its relevance to specific situations, but the fact that readers who have a low tolerance for ambiguity tend to regard the -ism as a substitute for all alternative ideas.

Debating educational anti-matter

Suggestions that educational fora should debate opposing viewpoints, however, can fall on deaf ears. It can even be difficult to convince others that valid opposing viewpoints actually exist, and that behind every -ism an anti-ism is struggling to get out. I learned this recently on writing a reflection for this journal, which suggested, somewhat mischievously, that the natural corollary of flexible learning is inflexible learning (Baggaley, 2011a). I chose the time-honoured academic tradition of ironic satire to make this point, and I stated that from now on I would devote my career to inflexibility. A reader took me literally on this, and declared angrily that I should know better. His reaction was exactly that for which satirists aim—a

harsh response from which to move into discussion. Marshall McLuhan was a master of that technique, deliberately avoiding presenting his views about the communications media in linear sequences, not wishing to over-simplify complex processes (Lamberti, 2011). His debating tactics derived from his background in English literature, in which ambiguity and shifts of meaning are tolerated; and the dynamism of his approach provoked heated argument. "Perhaps McLuhan has accomplished the greatest paradox of all," said Jonathan Miller (1971, p. 132), "creating the possibility of truth by shocking us all with a gigantic system of lies."

Dynamism: there's an -ism one doesn't hear about too often in current discussions of education. Static attitudes seem to be preferred: e.g., either connect or don't. The success of current social media applications in education may depend on creating dynamic protocols that allow users to go underground for a while without giving offence to others who sit waiting for their next utterances. Today's students, so deeply embedded in social media activities, may lack the social skills to disconnect in the absence of such protocols, even though at times they may deeply wish to do so. My current automatic email response is designed as such a protocol: "… will be unable to deal with regular email before February 2012." That annoys some people, in keeping with other things that I write. They don't like my approach to connecting selectively with the world, for in their social media philosophy anything less than full-blown connectivism is a Bad Thing. I won't change my email response, however, because I have deadlines to protect that have a higher priority than their sensitivities!

Protectionism: there's another -ism one would have to be careful in recommending currently, owing to its generally negative connotations. However, it too can be valuable when an idea, or an economy, or a family needs protecting, incubating or rebuilding. Similarly, isolationism, the polar opposite of connectivism, is a powerful -ism for when one needs to take stock, or to avoid expressing untimely ideas that could cause a turf war; and connectivism, the issue with which this reflection opened, is a prime candidate for analysis in terms of its academic originality and timeliness.

Connecting and conversing

The concept of connectivism has had serious critics since it was reiterated by Siemens (2004) and Downes (2007). One detractor has gone so far as to suggest that it is a hoax along the lines of the 1996 Sokal hoax, designed to test the rigour of academic publications and those who read them (Lange, 2011); and it may certainly be argued that connectedness is not necessarily appropriate for all the people all the time. The current view of connectivism emulates social learning theories and constructivist approaches to education, while going further, according to Siemens (2008), in discussing the role of network principles at multiple levels of the learning process, including neural, conceptual, and social, and in relation to digital technologies. These emphases were previously made by the cyberneticians Wiener (1948) and Pask (1976). The more recent version of connectivism was nonetheless timely in the context of a new online era. In suggesting that online teachers and students should interact more directly, the early twenty-first-century idea of connectedness indicated the need to question prevailing asynchronous approaches.

A further distinguishing feature claimed for connectivism compared with other viewpoints (Siemens, 2008) is unarguable: this connectivism was newer. It therefore

differs from previous views of connectedness, its author suggests, by referring to the very latest digital technologies and to the climate that has produced them:

> Connectivism finds its roots in the climate of abundance, rapid change, diverse information sources and perspectives, and the critical need to find a way to filter and make sense of the chaos. (Siemens, 2008)

To one who read them at the time, the same observations seemed equally timely when Pask made them in the context of the digital media of the 1970s. In conversation theory, Pask (1976) stated that learning occurs when subject matter is discussed in conversations including those digitally mediated by computers. In his interactions of actors theory, Pask (Pask & De Zeeuw, 1993) updated his views with reference to the newer digital media that convey knowledge. It is certainly timely that Pask's ideas have been reintroduced in the twenty-first century. A problem for his conversation theory in the ongoing survival contest between academic ideas is, as many have pointed out, that it is difficult to read and understand. Nonetheless, as the work of Surface (2010) suggests, it would be useful for today's distance education opinion leaders to be led by new representations of the cybernetics tradition, with due acknowledgement to the cyberneticians.

It was even difficult to have a conversation about conversation theory with Pask, although many tried, for he spoke at very low volume. My solution, in working with Gordon Pask in the 1980s at Concordia University, Montreal, was to discuss anything but conversation theory. I always supposed that he would welcome a conversation that started out with something other than "Explain conversation theory to me"—and he seemed to light up when one followed this uncommon tactic. One of our favourite shared topics was the Floral Pavilion theatre in Merseyside, where we had both acted and directed in our spare time. That topic would have provided a good shared basis of understanding for subsequent conversations with Pask about his interactions of actors theory; and I wish I had had the chance. Although his theory's use of the term *actor* does not relate narrowly to people who act on stage or screen, Pask's lifelong interest in the theatrical process informed his view of how learning is shared digitally and cinematically.

Maybe *selective connectivism* would be a good new -ism that could help to justify notions of connectedness (if one wished to propose it formally), just as selective attention has become a pillar of perceptual psychology. A similar case could be made for recognizing connectivism and disconnectivism as a psychological continuum, with a logical connection to the introversion–extraversion continuum. Eysenck (1967) found that introverts tolerate sensory deprivation better than extraverts, whereas extraverts crave external stimulation in order to keep motivated. Runco and Richards, in their study of creativity and health, suggested that this may be why introverts "opt for quiet, private experiences" (1997, p. 257); and in online education it might well be extraverts who prefer and benefit from social media-based activities. The psychoticism dimension, independent of introversion–extraversion (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1976), also has a potential role to play in understanding online interactions and the hostile, dysfunctional kinds of behaviour (e.g., *flaming*: Moor, Heuvelman, & Verleur, 2010) all too often displayed there.

I suspect it was an introvert learner angered by semi-psychotic peers who wrote this in a recent distance education discussion forum:

> The college thinks I should partner with (other learners) … I don't think so. The sick part is that there are probably tons of bright people in these courses but they, like me, hide and keep their mouths shut because the idiots run rampant and make the most noise like monkeys with pots and pans. (Student cited by Baggaley, 2011b, p. 151)

That student would probably approve of disconnectivism, and of the facility to shift between connecting and disconnecting in different situations. In the current distance education climate, however, the idea of a dynamic psychological continuum between these extremes may be untimely, suggesting the need for individualized course approaches with prohibitive costs.

Some actors—those who use Stanislavski's method approach, for example—go even further than disconnecting, in totally detaching from reality to play a role; and, yes, there is an -ism for that as well, reveals Google. Dissociationism is the view that the individual is made up of multiple consciousnesses though usually unaware of it (Hilgard, 1977). After receiving intensive method training, actors endorse exploring the "high fantasy proneness" of this condition to a level that Thomson and Jaque (2011) imply is borderline pathological. Therefore, once again, connecting is not for everybody.

On reflection

Ulrich Tabor, the German actor whose insights opened this article, suggested the need to stand back, disconnect, and wait for new structures to emerge. In a world that is complex, and where one needs new ways of portraying that complexity, it is vital to have a chance to take occasional time out, and to contemplate viewpoints opposed to those commonly accepted. Taking the time to consider ideas generated decades ago, rather than naturally assuming them to be out of date, can also throw current ideas into a healthy flux: hence, the timeliness of considering the notions of educational cybernetics in today's distance education. The issues of open and distance education require deep consideration and provocative debate; and the dizzying rates of exchange caused by today's social media may be incapable of providing either. Reflections, in journals that condone them, are a useful format for incubating ideas; and disconnecting from other viewpoints is a vital part of the reflecting process. I personally support the concept of connectivism just as I don't recommend people to become hermits. However, it is important to be able to shift dynamically between connectedness and disconnectedness at the right moment, just as one changes one's clothes to suit the weather. Just don't stand around disconnected for too long.

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