

PEARLY GATES, IVORY TOWERS AND THE WORKPLACE: DEVELOPING PROFESSIONAL IDENTITIES THROUGH CONNECTIVISM

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Abstract

This discussion explores the impact of space and place on online communities that support workplace learning and the developing legal professional. Metaphors of cyberspace from the 1990s are revisited to examine if the anticipated potential for cyberspace as “a place where we will be freed from the limitation and embarrassment of physical embodiment” (Wertheim, 1999) enhances students’ emerging professional legal identity. Siemens’ (2005) concept of connectivism is useful to consider how *Law in Practice* at Victoria University in Melbourne, Australia, might be complemented, multiplied and supported through online communities in a blending of the real and virtual.

In the closing decades of the twentieth century, reality is disappearing behind a screen.

(Rheingold, 1991)

Our concept of ‘place’ is based upon the ability to communicate. The place created by the act of communication is not necessarily the same as that at either end of the communication link, for there is information at each end that is not transmitted. The ‘place’ is defined by the information that is commonly available to both people.

(Krueger, 1983)

Introduction

Conceptions of space and place impact on online communities that support workplace learning and the development of students’ professional identities. This discussion revisits some of the metaphors of cyberspace from the 1980s to examine if the potential for cyberspace as “a place where we will be freed from the limitation and embarrassment of physical embodiment” (Wertheim, 1999) enhances students’ opportunities to develop a professional identity in law. In addition, the overly neat, dichotomous separation of real and virtual spaces — so definite two decades ago — is examined and found to be less problematically segregated than authors (Krueger, 1983; Rheingold, 1991) anticipated. This less

problematic synthesis of real and virtual is significant when online learning activities are used to collaboratively create meaning from real, workplace experience.

Of particular concern in much of the literature around cyberspace was the business of reality — artificial reality, simulation and virtuality. When alarmists warned of people "Entering Cyberspace" and of "Breaking the Reality Barrier" (Rheingold, 1991) in the 1980s and 1990s, it seemed that the reality and the spaces on offer through technology were alternatives to the *real* reality — rather than a medium that would mesh and extend our current senses of self and real. The exponential expansion of cyberspace led to speculation about what converging technologies would mean for identities. Dynamic electronic spaces were deemed able to shape ways of interaction that would allow for fluid and multiple identities. Cyberspace created a renewed focus on the ways in which identity might be constituted: educational, social and professional identities had new technologies in which to be formed and through which to interact and learn. Certainly, Walser thought that cyberspace was so radically unreal, that it "gives people the feeling they have been transported, bodily, from the ordinary physical world" (Walser, 1990 cited in Rheingold, 1991). Communal blogs such as those created to support learning in the workplace would be years away — as would Facebook, YouTube and other social networking sites that are so ordinary despite their recency.

What is real? *Where* is real? Who are we in cyberspace? It would appear that our sense of identity, our sense of being located, is dependent on external reality. Amongst all the hype and anxiety about virtual reality, a more human potentiality also emerged: communication. Rheingold (1991) for one stressed the importance of communication for humans and emphasised that technologies — including a comprehensive, immersive cyberspace — could extend, enhance and improve communication between people. Another prediction also proved accurate and is of significance to educators committed to constructivist ideas of learning: online participants would have greater capacity to be interactive and active *producers* of meaning and cultures, not just consumers of information (Walser & Gulichsen, 1989 in Rheingold, 1991). Turkle, writing about MUD (Multiple-User Domains) players, notes that participants "become authors not only of text but of themselves, constructing new selves through social interaction" (Turkle, 1996 in Zappen, 2005). How this might apply to novice legal practitioners reflecting online is yet to be researched in a systematic way.

The Workplace

Alongside an explosion of virtual learning spaces throughout universities in Europe, North America and Australia in the last decade, many universities have also begun to place a strong emphasis on learning in the workplace. In keeping with an expectation in Australia that universities should ensure that their

graduates are work-ready, Victoria University (VU) in Melbourne has a policy of Learning in the Workplace and Community (LiWC) which requires that 25% of courses includes industry-engaged curriculum. The LiWC approach seeks to achieve an enriched learning experience, increased industry engagement with curriculum and enhanced transition to employment.

LiWC at VU encourages teaching approaches that engage with industry and the professions. LiWC approaches in Law include case studies developed with legal practitioners, simulations such as moot court, reflections of court proceedings, working on legal cases offered by law firms, or working in a legal workplace. In VU's Law degree, various units use the legal workplace as a site for learning. For law students, the workplace has long been regarded as a rich learning space. In Law, the LiWC approach aims to increase a student's sense of being a professional with a capacity to critique, reflect and behave ethically as a lawyer. The emphasis of much LiWC is for students to be, bodily, in a physical workplace. Often alone and geographically isolated, online communication and collaboration with legal academics and similarly situated students is vital.

Legal education often focuses on transfer of information. However, ethical and social responsibility and a consciousness of how community and culture are expressed in a profession and its values reproduced are difficult to achieve by mere transference. Students' engagement with professional identity is fundamental to their sense of being and frames the process of learning and formation of meaning. A sense of professional identity is vital to the student or novice lawyer. VU's law students develop legal knowledge and their professional identity as lawyers in a range of different unpaid and paid work contexts. Some work as paralegals or legal secretaries in firms, others volunteer at community legal centres or are involved in support roles such as help lines in government departments. Learning in the legal workplace is a crucial stage in *becoming* a lawyer and learning lawyering. Place — despite the variety of legal workplaces possible — has an integral, educative role in informing the legal identity. In a legal role, the law student understands “that real lawyering goes beyond technical judgments based on dry and logical analysis” (Hyams, 2008, p. 27). But how can one legal experience synecdochally represent ‘the law’ and how do online communities support students to develop a professional identity?

No one legal work place or role can represent the law and interaction with limited people and places might develop a skewed notion of what the legal profession entails. Together with developing students' capacity to reflect on their own roles in a particular legal work place, online discussion and online journals ensure that students are exposed to multiple legal work places, roles and issues. Ironically, this online activity increases the human interface of the learning experience. Online discussion also supports ‘legitimate peripheral participation’ (Lave & Wenger, 1991) at work. In these blogs, students report de-identified data and are trained in issues of confidentiality and ethical communication. The reporting of workplace events and issues offers an opportunity for students to apply legal

concepts. The online communal space, moderated by a law academic, is crucial to students developing an understanding of how meaning — including ethical positions and professional identity — is constructed through a collective understanding of the legal profession. Having both participated in and contributed to an understanding of legal discourse, students have a foundation for understanding themselves as legal professionals operating in that culture. Reporting of and reflecting on legal issues forms one aspect of the learning. In blogs students construct their online identities — and their workplaces — via print-based texts: words on the screen. Words are enough to “contribute to a sense of presence” (Rheingold, 1991, p. 88) and other signifiers connote not only identity, but place. The focus on visual representation of linguistic messages in blogging is also a reminder of Marshall McLuhan’s sensible observations (1967) that a computer is a medium not another world (McLuhan in McLuhan & Zingrone, 1997).

Online discussion moves students’ personal reflections to a social setting and allows for a broader sense of the legal community to develop. This online forum provides a vital space for students’ disparate and distinct legal workplace experiences to come together; an “imaginary locus of interaction created by communal agreement” (Stone, 1991). This virtual space effectively amplifies ‘the workplace’ to more diversely represent the possibilities of the legal professional. The multiplicity of legal workplaces enhances students’ abilities to theorise and generalise personal experience. This observation also connects with the idea of connectivism as amplifying “learning, knowledge and understanding through the extension of a personal network” (Siemens, 2005).

Space, Place and Beyond

Are particular places intrinsically more educationally valuable? Work Integrated Learning (WIL) is widely regarded as *the* key means through which professional readiness is achieved but is simply being in a workplace an inherently richer or more valuable learning experience than being elsewhere? WIL confronts learners with a distinction between classroom and workplace that requires a consideration of how sites of learning are defined. WIL also raises the question of whether the division between theory and practice can be reduced to the geographical context of the learning. If learning is student centred, why are locations used to describe that learning? The workplace is often referred to as ‘the real world’ compared to the abstract world of the university but these spatial metaphors perpetuate a binary opposition that might not exist.

There seems to be an assumption that, in order for theory and practice to merge, a place other than the classroom is required. Often, theory and practice are treated as separate entities occupying different spaces. This essentially false dichotomy between theory and practice means that many stakeholders — students, employees and academics — seem to privilege workplace learning over

university-based learning. Law schools position themselves in relation to this binary as a theoretically-oriented ‘black letter law’ school or as a work-oriented practical school. Yet, theory and practice are complementary and interactions in online spaces may render questions of the ‘real’ world or even the workplace overly simplistic.

Location itself may not engender learning but learning is facilitated by the technology (Siemens, 2005). Communal blogs for law students create a collaborative, dynamic social space for students to reflect and construct meanings about legal roles, legal concepts and work. Students post their thoughts online and read and comment on at least two other postings. WIL typically *uses* the workplace — its clients, policies, documents, staff, spaces — to teach. However, interaction between peers and lecturers is essential to create meaning from placement in a legal role. The “de-situated” online space underpins “how [legal] workplaces can be(come) places of productive learning . . . for students” (McCormack, Pancini, & Tout, 2010).

Experiential and reflective learning is evident in students’ online activities where they move from merely describing workplace events or processes or roles to analysing, offering new understandings or new meanings and suggesting alternative future actions (Pavlovich, 2007). Blogging offers a rich example of situative learning whereby the focus moves from “the individual as learner to learning as participation in the social world” (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Online activities also emphasise the interaction between learners and legal academics required of a community of learners (Helleve 2010 in Söderstrom, 2010). Social constructivism informs the postings and student comments on each other’s work. Postings are about place and geographically-bound work sites. They are about being, bodily, in a place. In this respect, connective technologies “may enhance place-based community and facilitate the generation of social capital” (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). Social capital is crucial to enable students to enter a profession and, more specially, a place of work. This blogging by VU’s law students is not as grandiose an experience that early ideas of cyberspace may have expected. In fact, it has become unremarkably commonplace. No simulations, no avatars as such, no graphics. Reality, via the blog, is hardly transformatively Other. The focus of the medium is communication and connection through individual and social reflection represented in text. And yet, the experience of the workplace demonstrates that embodiment continues to be important in identity formation, especially for those whose bodies make them outsiders in an elite institution. Race, gender and class can all be reflected or connoted in accent and bodily disposition (Sommerlad, 2007).

We cannot escape embodiment, but the active process of identity construction in virtual space gives some flexibility to explore identities and even professional persona. Cyberspace may not be the predicted imaginary space of “transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities” (Haraway 1991 in Sullivan, 2006). But it may offer a safe place to ‘be’ or become. For example,

feedback from a facilitator can help students to edit their comments and present their opinions in a suitably professional format. Such moderation can alert students to the dangers of communicating without thinking in a public or professional format. This role challenges the facilitator to find the right balance (Olofsson, Lindberg, & Hauge, 2010) as skills of virtuality clearly go beyond just using the software. They must understand new forms of identity and have skills in moderation, facilitation and appropriate intervention in online communities.

We should be cautious about using abstract spatial metaphors which seem to reject the messy complexity of life (Merrifield, 2006). Lefebvre's uniting theory of space, spatiology, involves "a rapprochement between *physical* space (nature), *mental* space (formal abstractions about space), and *social* space (the space of human interaction)" (Merrifield, 2006, p. 104). The combination of learning in a workplace that is reflected upon in a communal social online setting achieves a unified space *of* and *for* learning. This Other virtual space may, as many have suggested (Wertheim, 1999), free learners of physical limitations and enable creative and innovative thought with communities of similarly disembodied but like-minded avatars.

In the 1980s and 90s, the virtual world promised a kind of equality, as though disembodiment would enable identity to be kept separate from body: "technology [w]as a tool . . . separate from the subject who employs it; [technology was] . . . unequivocally good or bad, liberatory or repressive" (Sullivan, 2006). It seems more accurate and less combative to refuse this either/or model: "there is no 'real', fixed, or essential technology" (Farquhar, 1996 cited in Sullivan, 2006). In early literature, too, there seemed to be "a disdain . . . for the physicalities of the 'real body'" (Lupton & Seymour, 2003, p. 249). Yet recent post-feminists suggest: "bodily-being . . . is always already technologised, and technologies are always already enfleshed" (Sullivan, 2006); in effect, "technology and culture constitute each other" (Stone, 1991). So, while early ideas of cyberspace challenged the Cartesian self with its soul/body split, only recently has somatechnics rigorously theorised the idea that technologies are not external to "the body." Rather, bodies are constructed, located and lived in, with and via technologies. This synthesised and dynamic sense of technology and body makes sense in relation to LiWC and blogging.

Professional Identity and Education

What does it mean to be a lawyer? To think and behave like a lawyer? Situated learning supported by an online community of peers and an academic means that would-be lawyers experience enculturation into the discourses of the legal profession. "Workplaces are 'crucibles' of identity formation . . . The traditional apprenticeship system, aspects of which . . . continue to underpin work-based training, is highly effective in effecting this professional socialization. This experiential learning, in which practices (both technical and cultural) are

modelled by the master, breaks trainees down and remakes them in the image of the firm” (Sommerlad, 2007, p. 210). In the case of blogging and the multiplication of the legal workplace, the assimilation and “professional socialization” of novices can be both achieved and disrupted. Legal educators are torn between the needs of students to construct professional identities consistent with their career aspirations and the responsibility to critique the professional structures which reproduce inequality and privilege elite culture. While it is an autonomous individual's choice to engage in this project of identity reconstruction, that does not absolve an educator from uncritically supporting these practices. The educational environment, physical and virtual, is a space in which these tensions can be explored and made overt.

Identity is deployed in a spatialised way. It is contextual and defines how an individual operates and represents themselves in different social fields and across a multitude of social spaces (Gee, 2001). Nyström (2009) argues that professional identity negotiates between three distinct social fields in which a professional operates: Professional (work), Personal (internal self and individual reflection), and Private (family and leisure). Drawing on longitudinal interview research, Nyström argues that new professionals pass through three phases in the integration of these ‘life spheres.’ the last of which involves a confident, integrated identity that continues across the spheres. Narrative is also important to professional identity. Learning environments can use narrative to describe and reflect on situations and knowledge. Importantly for identity, narrative can connect public and private realms (Hooley, 2007, p. 56) and emphasise the public role of the professional, including public good and professional responsibility. To tell stories is insufficient; it is more important “to reconstruct experiences for new meaning and understanding, so that new approaches to issues can be contemplated and implemented” (Hooley, 2007, p. 54). This is what appears to occur in blogs.

Empirical research (Sommerlad, 2007) illustrates the importance of professional identity and cultural capital for law students from diverse backgrounds. Legal education now includes students from a range of non-elite backgrounds but the institutions of law continue to privilege the elite. There is no neutral professional identity: “In the legal profession, coherent with law’s discursive construction as value-free, this entailed the production of the ‘disembodied’, ‘bleached out’ professional who was/is in reality distinctly gendered, raced and classed” (Sommerlad, 2007, p. 194). Students from elite ‘privileged insider’ backgrounds find that “The process of ‘becoming’ is immanent within all their corporeality and cultural life, resulting in a harmony between their private and public existences, in practical terms their private existence is moulded to support their public career and their public career makes use of their private world” (Sommerlad, 2007, p. 197). Often, students from non-elite backgrounds struggle with this process: their private world is at odds with the professional identity (Sommerlad, 2007).

Examples of difference between elite and non-elite groups include ways in which authority is encoded in dress and speech, vocabulary and accent as well as

realistic expectations of career and success. Interviews with employers emphasise the importance of behaviours which are not described in selection criteria but are rather a socially constructed “gut instinct” (Sommerlad, 2007). In a prestigious profession such as law, these are coded yet obvious differences and many of them are physical. An increase in student diversity in the law school means more diverse identities. Gradually, the profile — cultural and social — of “the Law” is changing. In the meantime, however, VU has a diverse student body that will challenge stereotypes of the legal professional. Cyberspace creates an opportunity to explore identity formation practices. Further, the anonymity available online could be used to challenge unfair practices of exclusion within the profession.

For constructivist curriculum designers, the student is the site of learning, regardless of their geographical situation and whether they are disembodied or not. Blogs provide a different space for learners undertaking work placement. Blogs refuse the false dichotomy between theory and practice and academic versus real worlds together with the spatial metaphors which see learning activities confined to discrete spaces. Blogs demonstrate how cyberspace can act as a bridge between different domains. Wertheim’s metaphor of “the pearly gates of cyberspace” (1999) is a heavenly notion of cyberspace that draws on a Cartesian dualism privileging virtual spaces (occupied ethereally by the mind) over “real” spaces (occupied by the body). The dichotomy of virtual and real life was often deemed problematic in a way that seems overblown today. It would seem that cyberspace has disrupted many abstract spatial metaphors.

Now — a decade on — virtuality is commonplace: Facebook is a core communication tool through which individuals constitute identity and express community, blogging is a routine activity and the private. Private thoughts, reflections, observations can all too easily become very public. Virtuality — however it manifests itself — provides a flexible and multiple (Turkle, 1999) canvas on which to explore identity formation and to examine the fluid and contextual aspect of identity. Online reflective environments allow students to think about the process of identity construction in a virtual but nonetheless highly social setting. Identity is differently constructed in the various communities of which an individual is a member. Professional identity is not unitary but neither is it fragmented; rather, it is a ‘work of reconciliation’ as one moves between different communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). Professional identity, then, is something that students need to ‘try on’: and virtual communities are the perfect ‘place’ to do so.

Virtuality and Connectivism: Brave New Cyber Worlds

Throughout the 1990s, dominant themes in cyber culture included the capacity of virtual communities to mitigate the isolation and social fragmentation of the post-modern condition (Bromberg, 1996 in Bell, 2001) through online communities (Rheingold, 1991) and networks that would link “millions of people . . . in new

spaces that are changing the way we think . . . the form of our communities, our very identities” (Turkle, 1996). Alongside comforting images of connected, albeit altered, communities, other writers worried that technology would further fragment and dehumanise society. Rheingold’s *Virtual Reality* (1991) and Krueger’s *Artificial Reality* (1984) highlight the industrial, medical and technological application of new technologies.

While pundits looked to online virtual worlds as places to shape our identities, these worlds or experiences have not taken the dramatic immersive 'virtual reality' form predicted. True virtuality is much more every day. It is experienced through social networking and accessed in a variety of mobile platforms from many different real locations. This kind of virtuality is a part of everyday life. The tools of constructing and presenting identity through a simple static Facebook avatar picture and collection of data is much more accessible than building a 3D avatar in Second Life. The everyday nature of this virtual identity construction can obscure the complexity of the process and the way in which the process works across public and private realms, social and professional life. Social networking tools can easily blur private and public, social and professional: “the once clear gap between work and play is a legal and ethical minefield” (Gibson, 2010). It is important that educators both understand how social networking tools impact on professional identity construction and provide environments where students can explore the process.

The important aspect to communal blogging concerns both the capacity to multiply and amplify places and identities and to communicate with others in line with the contention of the connectivist learning paradigm (Siemens, 2005). Online technologies enable connectivism. Siemens (2005) argues that ICT has so radically altered how people learn that a new approach to theorising learning using technology is needed based on technology and connection-making. Further, “Meaning-making and forming connections between specialized communities are important activities” (Siemens, 2005). One comment that Siemens makes has particular resonance for the online community of law students reflecting about their respective workplaces: “Learning is a process that occurs within nebulous environments of shifting core elements — not entirely under the control of the individual” (Siemens, 2005). Some of the principles of connectivism are pertinent to this cohort of learners who learn from each other’s postings and work experiences:

- learning and knowledge rests in diversity of opinions,
- nurturing and maintaining connections is needed to facilitate continual learning, and
- currency is the intent of all connectivist learning activities.

Connectivism provides a framework for understanding the role of technologies in education and in forming professional identity. Using the network metaphor, connectivism holds that much knowledge is external to the individual and that the

process of learning involves formation of knowledge networks to access, evaluate and make decisions about information (Siemens, 2005). A learner must balance formal and informal sources of knowledge and competing claims to professional expertise. On any particular professional decision, learners must balance advice from mentors, colleagues and academics, along with what they have learned by other means. A reflective learning process enables a learner to frame, contextualise and evaluate these different claims. By journaling, students can describe and position these different opinions as well as analyse their own process in making a decision between these options. Supporting WIL through journaling or blogging seems a natural fit with connectivism.

As Schön (1983) notes in *The Reflective Practitioner*, reflective practice requires the student be in an unfamiliar situation and most VU students are unfamiliar with legal workplaces. Reflections allow each student to debrief (Hyams, 2008) about new experiences. Situated learning supported by an online community allows novice legal practitioners to experience the discourses of the legal profession. Reflective capacity is a key methodology for developing professional identities — especially when reflections are triggered by workplace practice, culture and events and amplified and commented on in a communal online setting in a context of trust and mutual learning. Billet argues that the process of becoming a professional involves both internal ontogenic development and also a process of interaction and communication with others (Billet, 2006). Communal reflective journaling, then, is crucial to the emerging professional identity and, quite simply: “Reflective writing is central to the notion of reflective practice” (Beatson & Larkin, 2010, p. 6).

The advantage of reflective learning is that it assesses the student’s ability to self assess and learn from the work context, rather than assessing the work itself. The blogs also demonstrate a “meta-reflective function...as they function as reflections concerning other learners’ comments related to one’s own posting in the blog (Olofsson et al., 2010). The role of reflection in experiential learning is well established (Kolb, 1984). Reflection makes meaning of the individual experience in the workplace. Ledvinka sees reflection as “the magic ingredient which converts legal experience to education” (2006, pp. 29–30). Reflection in journaling is crucial in work-based learning precisely because it connects knowing content (discipline knowledge) to using that knowledge and then knowing how and why to use knowledge.

Reflection aligns with constructivist learning theories that place the learner at the centre of the learning experience as an “active agent in his or her knowledge formation” (DeLay, 1996, p. 77). Peer comments move personal reflection to a social setting and allow for a broad sense of the legal community to develop. It is worth recalling that technology itself does not create a community of learners (Söderström, 2010). While online forums support both reflection and communication necessary for learners to create meaning from the experience, motivation of learners through academic feedback and assessment is also vital.

Conclusion

The legal workplace has been regarded as an actual, physical testing ground that serves to assess whether the law student “can actually be a lawyer” (Hymans, 2006) — a site of summative rather than formative assessment. In the Bachelor of Laws degree at VU, structured online learning activities and communal blogging activities help to invest workplace learning with academic rigour to ensure that, irrespective of *where* the legal role is assumed, the student is engaged in a professionally appropriate and rich learning experience. There is much evidence to suggest that students collectively make individual workplace experiences meaningful through online social interaction. Through the blogs, ‘the workplace’ is effectively amplified enabling an increased awareness of the multiplicity of legal workplaces and enhancing students’ abilities to generalise their personal experience. Discussion creates a virtual intersection between the professional space, the legal academic and the students’ emerging professional identity and allows for the lone, situated learning experience to become participatory and discursive.

This learning does not occur in a disembodied, virtual space of endless possibilities but in concrete, embodied experience which is made meaningful through online reflection. The societal aspects of the learning and the virtual reflective space that complements the physical workplace all combine to support students at a crucial time of their professional learning: “learning, knowledge and expertise all derive from participation in a social grouping, which possesses and passes on its practices and ways of doing things along with the associated purposes, values, criteria and, stories” (McCormack et al., 2010, p. 42). The social groupings for those learning to be a lawyer include both real and virtual places or, rather, a more seamless experience of various places and contexts anchored in the individual learner. Through the connectivity of these learning contexts the student is enabled to reflect on experience and synthesise a cohesive professional identity which synthesises both theory and practice to make their workplace meaningful and the possibilities of other workplaces real.

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