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# Distance learning as alterity: facilitating the experience of variation and professional information practice

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## Abstract

Informed learning (Bruce, 2008) is a pedagogic framework that aims to enable students to use information to learn through the experience of variation in the relational frame. The research described in this paper comes from a larger project called Stewarding and Power In Digital Educational Resources (SPIDER) and we describe how the mixing of campus based and distance students has been used to enhance informed learning within a postgraduate degree unit. The original contribution is to investigate the specific impact of 'alterity' (Linell, 2009) on the experience of variation. Online group tasks mixed campus and distance students together and we studied the various ways that students used information to learn. Evidence from discussion board posts supports our claims that discussion board activities enable dialogues and that diversity within the learning community enhances learning through alterity. We conclude that online learning has much to offer information literacy education, whether used alone or when campus based and distance students are given online tasks to do together. This paper brings new insight to the field of information literacy education by showing how distance learning brings a distinct quality to information literacy pedagogy, as it provides specific opportunities for learners to teach each other and then make critically-informed judgements about contexts, information and technology with which they are unfamiliar. We suggest that similar pedagogic approaches could be adopted in other disciplines and contexts. Given the increasing diversity present within higher education, such approaches are potentially very valuable.

## Keywords

alterity; higher education; information literacy; informed learning; online learning; relational frame; UK

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## 1. Introduction: the importance of difference to the study of information literacy

Much prior work on information literacy (IL) education has explored the value of exposing students to difference. In her work on informed learning (Bruce, 2008) and, with colleagues, the six frames of IL education (Bruce, Edwards & Lupton, 2006), Christine Bruce has explored the idea that in the 'relational' frame of IL, learning:

... occurs when variation in ways of understanding or experiencing are discerned...  
[students] must explore variation by comparing and analysing their experiences.

Students need to be actively engaged in discussion and reflection in order to uncover variation in conception within the group. (Bruce et al., 2006, p.6)

This emphasis on 'discussion and reflection', or dialogue, as a fundamental characteristic of effective IL education is reiterated by Whitworth (2014), via the work of Bakhtin (1986). For Bakhtin, literacy is evident in every utterance, written or spoken, and not limited to specialised texts. The normative criteria that he develops, by which we can judge the legitimacy of authority and thus be (information) literate in a given context, include polyphony (multi-voicedness) and the existence of modes of dialogue through which each of these voices has a chance to interact and have its claims scrutinised (see Whitworth, 2014, p.121). Encounters with different information landscapes (Lloyd, 2010) and communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) are the means by which new information and perspectives can enter existing communities and invigorate them, help them avoid parochialism and provide fuel for learning.

But the simple eulogising of 'difference' as valuable also glosses over certain risks. Pursuing difference and variation for the sake of it may divert learners' attention away from the ways the practices and landscapes (Lloyd, 2010) they are already engaged with can be enhanced by cognitive work. Difference can also give rise to domination of one set of practices, or criteria for making judgements about information, over another. How, then, can difference be drawn on in the IL classroom in positive ways, meaning, how can both sides of the 'boundary zone' between different practices and landscapes benefit from the encounter? Can an encounter between different information practices bring benefits for both sides, or will the practices and judgements of one community be subordinated to the other (Whitworth, 2017)?

The research described in this paper comes from a larger project called 'Stewarding and Power In Digital Educational Resources' or SPIDER. SPIDER investigates how informed learning can be developed in practitioners. The original contribution is to investigate the specific impact of the notion of 'alterity' (Linell, 2009, pp.82–85) to the promotion of the positive value of difference in the IL classroom, or in Bruce's terms, the experience of variation. Alterity is defined as the quality that discussion brings to the practitioners' informed learning. In the context of the research reported on here, two different and geographically separate cohorts of students are required to work together, in small groups, on a series of assessed online discussion board tasks. The separation is not a barrier to participation, however; instead it becomes a locus of learning in which distance learners and on-campus learners engage in dialogue within the same pedagogical space.

This paper thereby brings new insight into the field of IL education by showing how distance learning may bring a distinct and perceptible quality to IL pedagogy, as it provides specific opportunities for learners to teach each other and then make critically-informed judgements about contexts, information and technology with which they are unfamiliar, thus bringing alterity into IL education in innovative ways. The data discussed in this paper support this conclusion by showing how alterity, and the experience of variation that it allows, enables learners to gain the authority to make judgements about these external contexts, to have these judgements validated by other learners, and thus, to collectively manage their information landscape and develop information literacy.

## **2. Information literacy as informed dialogue**

Informed learning (Bruce, 2008) is defined as the use of information to learn. Bruce promotes a view of information literacy education that seeks to help learners use information to bridge the gap between the learning spaces of higher education and those outside it, a development called for by several authorities (Cheuk, 2008; Inskip, 2014; Williams, Cooper & Wavell, 2014). Learners in higher education (HE) must develop IL in ways that not only meet their informational needs within the university, but also in ways that help them develop subsequent professional

practice. This requires IL teaching to expand beyond the important, but more generic work with information skills and competencies that are typically undertaken within academic libraries, and to penetrate broader academic pedagogy and practice, as it is in these disciplinary settings that students learn how information landscapes (Lloyd, 2010) are constructed within different realms of knowledge and practice.

According to Lloyd, 'Information landscapes are the communicative spaces that are created by people who co-participate in a field of practice' (2010, pp.2–3). The act of becoming informed, and thereby developing an ability to navigate a given information landscape, rests on dialogue between stakeholders in a setting. It is Whitworth's contention (2014) that only information literacy education that is based on dialogue can help learners appreciate information landscapes as collective creations, over which they, and other stakeholders, can assert authority, scrutinising the judgements which have formed the landscape over time. This dialogic view of IL posits that it is focused not just on individual cognition, but is intersubjective – that is, manifested more in practices, information behaviour and dialogue and communication between members of communities (see for example Harris, 2008).

Each of us has our own understandings of the world, and we often make information choices, or judgements about relevance, that are subjective and reflect our views, biases and personal interests (Saracevic, 2007). These individual, subjective judgements become aggregated into collective decisions through dialogue. Linell (2009, p.81) describes intersubjectivity as 'common ground' in communication and claims that without this communication would be impossible.

The pedagogical design problem in IL is therefore how to stimulate not new subjectivities but new intersubjectivities. Bruce's promotion of the value of the 'experience of variation' is strongly based on Marton and Booth's pedagogy of awareness (1997), in which 'learning occurs when we become aware of the different lenses through which we might see the object of our learning' (Bruce, 2008, p.11). The core task for teachers is therefore to 'help students encounter different ways of seeing the phenomenon we are teaching' (Bruce, 2008, p.23) and understand the similarities and differences between the 'home' context and alternate social settings. The pedagogical task is not simply to expose learners to an alternate setting (akin to, say, presenting them with a film about what it is like to work in a different country) but to facilitate dialogue across the boundaries that separate the two settings. Through this dialogue, intersubjective understandings can develop that allow the practices developed in one setting to be scrutinised in the light of insights into practices developed elsewhere, thus enabling the experience of variation.

### **3. Alterity, learning and knowledge**

Alterity, or 'outsideness' (Linell, 2009, pp.82–5), plays an essential role in developing intersubjective understandings. The contexts in which we develop information practices (Lloyd, 2010) have their most important interactions at the boundary zones where they come into contact with variation or difference. For Linell, therefore, alterity is crucial both to dialogue and to the development of knowledge that such dialogue facilitates:

The other's "outsideness" brings in a 'surplus' of vision, knowledge and understanding other than you had before or you had expected to encounter. The other may see things from points-of-view that have so far been strange or unfamiliar to yourself, and this forces you to reflect and try to understand, thereby possibly enriching your, and our collective, knowledge ... The other's discourse may function as a counterpoint, and it gives the individual opportunities for integration of others' knowledge. Since this is a mutual process among interlocutors, it provides for the development of socially partially shared knowledge. (2009, p.85)

Information flows across these boundaries will not be seamless. For all that the ideal dialogue is one oriented towards mutuality, consensus and reciprocity (Whitworth, 2014, p.103), Linell argues that in real communicative interactions:

... the other often comes with a perspective on things talked about that is different from oneself's own .... there are strains and tensions, differences between people and traditions, boundaries between communities (and reaching across these boundaries), knowledge, norms and expectations at variance. (2009, p.83)

For Linell, then, alterity is a quality. Essentially, he argues that a dialogue in which there is no apparent alterity is a less effective dialogue, in educational terms, than one where the contexts are not only different, but that the nature of these differences – the alterity – is revealed and explored.

It is this idea of alterity as the quality that brings the experience of variation into dialogue, and its value for IL education, that we want to explore in this paper. Alterity is a valuable quality but not an unproblematic one. Alterity is manifested not only by the positive experience of variation – the use of difference to generate new information practices on both sides of the boundary zone – but also the strains and tensions that it may reveal. If the experience of variation, dialogue and polyphony are accepted as important elements of IL pedagogy then we need to understand alterity, the quality that underlies them, and which is what allows difference to be positively drawn on in student-to-student dialogues. We want to examine how students' information landscapes can be structured in ways that are specifically focused on the promotion of alterity and seek to investigate the specific qualities that alterity brings to informed learning (the use of information to learn: Bruce, 2008, p.6).

We undertake this investigation in a setting where there are clear examples of variance between groups of learners, and where there are benefits to their interacting in ways that contribute to the formation of collective judgements (for example, attaining high grades). The specific nature of this setting is one where distance and on-campus learners of IL are mixed, and we examine the hypothesis that in this setting, using discussion boards that mix on-campus and distance learners enhances the quality of alterity in the dialogues taking place here in ways that could not happen in a standard classroom. This setting is now described in detail.

#### **4. Context of the SPIDER study**

To investigate how alterity and the experience of variation can be promoted through distance learning, SPIDER studied data from a postgraduate course unit at a large UK university. In the academic year of the study (2015–16) the unit had an enrolment of 60 students, of whom 18 were distance learning students.

The course is designed in ways that bring distance learners as far as possible into the on-campus learning community. An important element of this is a series of three assessed online discussions spread throughout the unit, in which on-campus and distance learning students are brought together in one of ten 'working groups'. The first activity is fairly simple in structure, in order to help learners become familiar with the affordances of the discussion board and the configuration of resources within the group. The second activity is more complex, and by the third – our specific focus here – learners are expected to be au fait with the format, and are using the discussion spaces relatively independently, with little intervention needed from the tutor or teaching assistant. Thus, they are expected to display authority within this communicative space and make their own collective and critical judgements about the relevance of information vis-a-vis the activity they were engaged in. (Whether they do these things or not is a matter for data analysis.)

Because the work on these activities is assessed, there is a requirement for groups, within these spaces, to formulate new practices. This is not a simulated or arbitrary activity, created for the purposes of the research project (cf. Saracevic, 2007), but a real one, with the shared learning need of group members being to collaborate to the benefit of all members, and deliver 'success' in the shared project activity: that is, outcomes that meet the course objectives, including but not limited to the attainment of a satisfactory grade. Thus, students have a collective motivation to share information about their contexts, make judgements and develop practices that are independent of our research.

The subject matter of the course is educational technology, and the activity comes after a field trip to a local museum that makes heavy use of a range of interactive digital technologies in its exhibitions. On-campus learners are asked to visit this museum (referred to hereafter as the Core Museum or CM), establish context-specific issues such as the target audience for the museum, how its subject matter may or may not be enhanced by the application of digital technologies, and then following the visit, collaborate in their working groups to design a new digital exhibit or online application for the museum. They are only asked to discuss the design, not to actually create an end product; nevertheless, the task requires them to make judgements about what is relevant in this context, and is aimed at developing their current, or future, professional practice as educational technologists.

For this task, the instruction given to the students was:

*...your group is asked to ... suggest designs for two applications of digital technologies, one for each of two museums. One of these will be the [Core Museum]. The other will be a different museum that one of your group visited. The applications can either be something that stands in the museum itself ... or a 'virtual exhibit', a way of allowing access to something in the museum's collection, or its 'visitor experience', in the online environment. (Drawn from teaching materials for 2015–16)*

While occasional distance learners (DL) live near enough to the CM to join the field trip, many do not: they live elsewhere in the UK, or abroad. Hence, these students are asked to create their own field trip. Down the years a variety of museums have been visited by distance learning students, from the high-tech Olympics Museum in Switzerland, to a war museum in Biafra, Nigeria, that was essentially a small collection of jeeps under canvas. Regardless, the objectives of the field trip for distance learners remain the same. Working groups are then asked to select one of the museums that their DL members have visited and design an activity for this museum alongside one for the CM. This second museum will hereafter be referred to as the Alternate Museum (AM).

It is important that the group is directly dissuaded from splitting into (at least) two different clusters: one (on-campus or proximate DL students) who have visited the CM, and the other(s), who visited the chosen AM. The marking rubric specifies that to get the best grades, each student must participate in the discussions for both museum contexts, and the guidelines suggest that the first task within the groups should be to introduce colleagues to the museum context(s) that they did not visit.

Thus, for the group to gain both formative and summative learning outcomes from the task, there is a need for each group member to demonstrate, via posts on the discussion board, how they have moved from a particular configuration of their information landscape at the beginning of the activity, where they have first-hand knowledge of only one of the museums being investigated, and no knowledge of the other(s), to a new configuration at the end, whereby they are (ideally) able to make judgements about relevance that are applicable in a context of which they had little or no prior knowledge. These judgements are not just subjective, but validated by

the other members of the community, through discussion. That these judgements are then recorded in the discussion board posts means they can be used as observational data.

## 5. Method

In order to understand the different experience of learners within a specific learning context, we chose to employ qualitative content analysis to analyse discussion board posts and course materials (including, for example, course assessments and marking criteria, unit learning aims and outcomes). The method has been used widely in education research and is appropriate to interpretative research (Kohlbacher, 2006). According to Bryman, qualitative content analysis 'comprises a searching-out of underlying themes in the materials being analyzed' (2004, p.392). A feature of the method is that the documents – the record of all posts on the discussion board – are stable and may be analysed repeatedly and by different researchers in order to overcome issues of reliability associated with coding (Kohlbacher, 2006).

Cross-coder validity was ensured by both authors independently coding discussion board data from one working group. The codes were then refined during research meetings. According to Barbour (2001, p.1116), '...multiple coding encourages thoroughness, both in interrogating the data at hand and in providing an account of how an analysis was developed'. To understand the impact of alterity on how learners made judgements about information, and collectively constructed their information landscapes, the study followed interactions between people engaged in a task over time, and the discussion board posts provided a means of observing these. The data are a record of change in how the learners perceived the task at the start of the encounter to how they did at the end; these changes allow us therefore to draw conclusions about the impact of alterity on student learning.

The full series of activities took place throughout the 2015–16 academic year, with the data used below drawn from the third activity in April 2016.

## 6. Ethics: anonymity, confidentiality and informed consent

Ethical consent for the research was gained from the local Ethics Approval Committee. Routine measures to achieve confidentiality included the removal of all personal identifiers such as names and addresses from both physical and computer held records, and their replacement with ID numbers. Aliases and codes were used to achieve and maintain anonymity. No formal contact was made with any participant until ethical approval was obtained. Each participant was given a letter of invitation together with a description of the proposed research, a Participant Information Sheet and a consent form. This documentation formed the basis of informed consent. All students in the cohort gave permission for their discussion board posts to be read, and the research did not begin until after the students had been graded.

## 7. Research questions

What evidence of alterity exists in online discussion board posts to support the argument that distance learning helps elicit learning in the relational frame?

In what ways does the mixing of campus based and distance students add to the experience of variation in learning that would not be present had the cohorts been kept separate?

## 8. Data analysis

Coffey et al. (1997) refer to documents as 'social facts', which are produced, shared, and used in socially organised ways. The collected documents were examined in order to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge (Bowen, 2009). Specific to this research,

the *stable record* from discussion board posts gives us a sense of the judgements learners were making *at the time* posts were written (not *post hoc*); and it is also a record of change, from the configuration of their information landscape at the start, through to how it looks at the end. This means that the data could provide evidence for impact of alterity, specifically from interactions between on-campus and distance learners, that yielded significant experience of variation in this context.

**Table 1:** Coding for discussion boards (after Linell, 2009)

Code	Description and justification
Distribution	Describing experience of museum to others. Group members posted descriptions of their experiences of visiting museums that formed the basis of discussions.
Shared	Shared experience (of museum) – we looked for places where students had similar or shared experiences of visiting the same museum. Or, where a description (see <i>Distribution</i> category) prompted students to reflect on similar experience(s) they may have had in another context,
Clarifications	Asking for clarifications most usually from someone who has visited museum or used a technology that another person was unfamiliar with.
Work/study factors	Specific reference to work/study that impacts on activity. This was important because the demands on distance/campus students are different and legitimate points of difference between the two cohorts.
Reflections	Reflections – we looked for specific reflections that related to the museums, work or social life, theory and/or practice that were prompted by the discussion activities.
Surplus of knowledge	A recognition that poster has extra knowledge/experience or background to add to discussion. This is a key factor in alterity.
Otherness	A recognition that poster or group members have different cultural values that provide alterity.
Judgements	A judgement about a museum not visited. We looked specifically for instances where students were able to make judgements about alternate contexts.
Conflict	Conflict – strains/tensions evident in discussions that reflect alterity.
Eureka Moment	Eureka moment – when a ‘non-visitor’ (campus or distance) has an epiphany about museum/technology not visited/used. This could be as a result of surplus of knowledge, reflection etc.
Prior expectations	(Explicit) expectations of museums with or without reference to theory – important to understand how people’s perceptions of museums (either on an individual basis or as a whole) changed as a consequence of the discussions.
Football fan	Football fan – very important for the CM activity.
Not a football fan	Not a football fan – how did this impact on judgements made?
Suggestions re: alternative museum	Suggestions re: museum not visited – a precursor to making a judgement, or a means of moving the discussion along.
Acknowledgment of suggestion	Acknowledgement of suggestion mostly from visitors to non-visitors – a validation of the worth of inputs made by non-attendees re: alternate context.

The coding strategy for the discussion boards involved looking for occasions where the descriptions offered of other contexts have led to changes in *value* and about the *judgements* the students make. We looked for posts or discussions where students engage in dialogues about the ‘alternative’ context and made judgements on them. A whole range of relevant factors came in to play, that are indicative of alterity, and of the experience of variation, and are practical indicators of learning in the relational frame. The codes used are listed in Table 1 (above) with descriptions and justifications for their use, and were derived from Linell’s (2009) discussion of alterity within dialogues, quoted above.

## 8. Findings and discussion

Bruce describes how learning in the relational frame can be facilitated through learners’ experience of variation (2008, p.11–12), and we suggest that Linell’s notion of alterity is the specific quality that discussion brings to this experience, and thus to informed learning. We hypothesise that distance learning can be a powerful tool for bringing alterity into student interactions, enabling learning in the relational frame, and thus enhancing student understandings of how information landscapes are constructed in professional contexts. In this research, we are able to look for how the alterity that is rooted in the distinction between distance and campus based students allows both sides to experience variation in ways that would not have occurred had the two cohorts been kept separate.

In analysing the data, we were looking for situations where judgements were made about the alternate context and where a student’s judgement has been informed by the experiences of the group members who had visited it. As described above, we used the codes in Table 1 to identify experiences of alterity.

### 8.1 Practice: different demographics of campus and distance students

Our analysis begins with the demographics of the two cohorts: in what ways are they different from each other and how do the differences enable the experience of variation?

At the start of the discussion board activities students were asked to post a brief biography. We used these descriptions to get some demographic data, summarised in Table 2.

**Table 2:** Key differences between distance and campus learners

Campus Learners (CL)	Distance Learners (DL)
Full time students, based in the city, completing Masters degree is primary focus	Part time students, working while studying, located worldwide in different time zones
Wide range of nationalities; almost no UK nationals (only one in 2015–16)	Still a range of nationalities but many more UK nationals
Not previously educated in UK	UK educated to degree level
Not native English speakers	Native English speakers
Broad range of work experience ranging from recent graduates to experienced professionals but generally less experience than distance students	Considerable (5+ years) experience in a relevant discipline
Typically younger (average age 25 approximately)	Typically older (average age 30+)

It is evident from the biographies that there was a great deal of diversity in the class as it comprised people from different cultural and national backgrounds, of various ages, with

different work and learning experiences. Such factors have impacts on learning (e.g. Rendon, 1994; Alder, 2000; Ramburuth & McCormick, 2000; Carroll & Ryan, 2007). Table 2 suggests that had the campus and distance students been kept separate from each other, then the opportunity for experiencing alterity would have been reduced significantly. The distance students would have formed groups from a relatively homogeneous cohort of English-speaking, UK-educated mid-career professionals, and the campus student groups, while still reasonably diverse (e.g. with regard to nationality, language, culture and work experience) would have comprised learners who had little or no prior experience of the UK education system, or life in the UK more generally. Since alterity is a quality of *dialogue*, it would not arise simply through the presence on the course of learners of different backgrounds, but through incorporating opportunities for frequent dialogue between these two groups in the course design. Another point to consider is the impact of course modality on the conduct of this dialogue. All DL were studying part time, often in different time zones to the UK, while the CL were full time, based on campus. While this may seem a relatively minor point, it increases alterity and provides greater experience of variation in the mixed groups. For example, the CL had different organisational priorities from those of the DLs (e.g. they had to organise course work deadlines around work ones) which was revealed through discussion posts.

It can thus be seen that multiple manifestations of alterity come into play around a single factor (distance/on-campus). Therefore, this is a boundary that is particularly important for the course design to cross, in order to attain its pedagogical goals (co-development of professional practice) and for the members of the community to fulfill their shared, instrumental learning needs. We argue that to achieve these goals, students need to reconfigure their informational environments and allow authority to flow across the distance/on-campus divide. In the following sections we provide further evidence to support this.

## **8.2 The museum task**

### **8.2.1 Discussion board data analysis**

In total, the ten groups generated approximately 1000 posts, ranging from a low of 47 posts to a high of 165 (mean 100, median 110). Learners are anonymised and referred to as campus learners (CL) or distance learners (DL) with a letter (e.g. CL1, DL2) to identify individual students.

### **8.2.2 Examples of alterity from assessed discussion board posts**

#### **1. *The range of museums discussed in posts***

At the outset, it is worth noting the number and variety of museums that were discussed by the groups. Apart from the Core Museum (CM), 23 named Alternate Museums (AM) were considered, along with several unspecified AM. The diversity was remarkable, similar to that posited in Section 4 (*Context*) above, and it stands to reason that had the two cohorts not been integrated the number discussed by each group would have been lower. The simplest examples of experience of variation come therefore from students describing museums to fellow group members who hadn't visited them. However, these descriptions are vital because they facilitate the flow of information across geographical boundaries. Students acknowledged how necessary this was for their learning. In the following example, CL1 appeals to his group members to share their experiences and acknowledges the important points made by DL1 about an AM in the Middle East:

*...let's share our experience regarding our museum visit ... I think sharing our experience about the museum and evaluate of what is lack or may be implemented is something we can discuss next... as you see [DL1] brought attention to many important points in designing learning environment from his experience when he visited the*

science museum in [the Middle East]. Therefore, *let us share our experiences* here and from that we can think and list the important aspects of our design. [our emphasis]

All working groups had examples like this, where students shared descriptions of museums. Such descriptions are legitimate examples of alterity, and the experience of variation across geographical boundaries, and a call to a new intersubjectivity from the sharing of experiences.

## **2. Interest (or lack of) in the subject matter**

The CM was devoted to the history and cultural background of football as a sport. Of the sixty students, five explicitly stated at the start of the task that they had no interest in football, while five described themselves as football fans. In this section, we focus on one working group in particular that contained two learners (CL1 and DL1) who were not interested in football, and a distance learner (DL2) who was a self-confessed football fanatic (DL2 alone posted more than 10,000 words to the discussion, which highlights his passion for the subject and engagement with the task).

In this group, several different examples of alterity were noted which are discussed below. The first aspect to consider is 'surplus of knowledge'. Without DL2, the group would have quickly settled on a relatively simple design for the CM that explained 'the laws of football' to non-fans.

Such a design was originally suggested by CL1:

.... From my experience, what I think is lack [sic] in [CM] is a display where the visitor can actually get the knowledge about football's rules and gameplay. *I'm not into football and I know almost nothing about football rules.* [our emphasis]

This was echoed by DL1, who revealed his own limited knowledge of football, and said of the original idea:

From the *perspective of someone who only likes Liverpool FC because there is a lovely bakery in Liverpool and the people are really friendly I like the idea.* Basic rules are a mystery to non-football fans and *having a crash course might make the game more interesting.* [our emphasis]

From the outset, DL2 had very different ideas regarding the design. His surplus of knowledge, and experiences of the game, provided a significantly different perspective and he drew upon descriptions of CM made by the CLs to *pass judgements* about the museum and what it should contain, even though he had not himself visited it:

I am not sure that *we can say that if you are informed or a 'real fan' then the museum has enough content...* The museum *should therefore attempt to bring that experience simply to the user, make learning possible at every juncture ... I would expect to walk in there and be able to learn, my level of prior knowledge should not be stigmatising ... Just because I know (I feel) a great deal about the game that should not mean that I have to walk around the place and come out knowing little more than I did when I walked in.* [our emphasis]

He justifies his position by drawing upon his views of what museums offer and what his experiences of being a UK born football fan can potentially bring to the design:

People attend museums for the sensory-motor stimulation that they offer,,. For me there is nothing better than the *sound* of your home crowd celebrating an important goal, or

the beauty of *God Save the Queen being sung by 90,000 England fans at Wembley. The taste of your pie or Bovril, ... the songs celebrating current and old players, even the smell of the guy sat next to you all add to the true experience of Football ...* I love the idea of being able to taste the energy bars and drinks, ...and the smell of Raljex, Wintergreen or dubbing (sic) would give me the nostalgia of *my playing days...* These things ... in my honest opinion *would enhance the experience* to such an extent that the Serotonin dump associated to it would make the museum moreish! [our emphasis]

His description to the group (citing, for example, pies, Bovril and the National Anthem) suggests alterity as both a 'surplus of knowledge' and 'otherness' with regards to the other members of the group who don't have the same cultural background.

Later in the discussion, DL2 asks a series of questions about CM, and CLs' experiences of it, and there is specific reference to their understanding/knowledge of the game. He seeks to understand the limits of CLs' knowledge and how that impacts on their experiences of the CM. This re-emphasises 'otherness':

What about the lighting and layout of the [CM]? Was there a set path? Were you guided along ... or could you move around freely and revisit other exhibits? ... Can I ask a few questions ...? Only basic answers needed of course!

For those of you who did visit, what is *your understanding of the game* and in relation to that what were your impressions of the museum?

Did you feel as though you could engage with the content? (*This is especially relevant to those with limited knowledge of the game*)

Did you have unanswered questions or were there things that you could not engage with *through lack of understanding?* [our emphasis]

These questions implicitly draw attention to the relatively greater knowledge that he has to share with the group. As the discussions continued, some tensions in the discussions emerged, and DL2 reflected on these. DL2 attempted to appease the group and simultaneously re-emphasise his surplus of knowledge:

*I hope my response was not too scathing, that was not my intention but I ... started writing from a fan's point of view* [our emphasis]

The tensions are a manifestation of alterity, but the design of the activity, and the conduct of the dialogue, also permit reflection on the tensions and, thus, are a way for the group to positively experience variation and reach a consensus about how to resolve differences and move forward, to build a shared information landscape. At this point in the discussion the group agreed a design based on 'demystifying the basic rules', but DL2 had a change of heart and produced a detailed design proposal (in excess of 3000 words) in opposition. This indicates the passion that DL2 had for the project, which was acknowledged when CL1 reflected on this development:

Again, I'm not a football fan so i don't really know if there something ... other than the display of the football rules and gameplay which I previously mentioned.

The sentiment expressed suggests CL1 recognises that he 'doesn't know what he doesn't know' and he therefore acknowledges that he needs input from others to help with the design. The surplus of knowledge from DL2 provides this.

To conclude this section, here is a further example of DL1 and DL2 passing judgement on CM in response to a description of an exhibit made by CL2:

DL1:

This is one of those "just put it out there even if it's a bit 'bobbins'"! It must be frustrating and unrewarding! *Is it not better to keep it simple and give people something that actually works!* Like an actual ball!!! [our emphasis]

DL2 responded:

Amen to that! Tech for the sake of tech. It doesn't develop skill either from what I can see.

To summarise, these excerpts provide clear evidence of discussions where alterity is integral and therefore the experience of variation. DLs were informed by their peers about CM, the working group engaged in debates about football and technology, sought clarifications from each other, there were conflicts, reflections and ultimately geographically separate distance learners were confident in making judgements about museums they had never visited. DL2 significantly influenced the final design through his surplus of knowledge.

### ***3. Interest in museums – prior professional experience stimulates learning and reflection***

In two working groups, DLs had previously worked in museums and were able therefore to bring prior professional experience to bear in group discussions. These illustrate “surplus of knowledge” coming from a professional rather than personal perspective. In the first working group, DL3 describes his visit to an art museum in Asia and draws upon his previous work experience:

Before moving to Asia I lived and worked in Europe at a [contemporary art museum]. I was part of the education department creating and imparting guided tours.

This prompted campus student CL3 to reveal that she was a keen museum goer, had a shared interest in art and therefore common ground with DL3. As a result of this, CL3 shared a video with the group that she had made (for a separate academic project) analysing how music is used within a specific art museum in Europe (an AM). The video may never have been shared within the working group had the CL and DL not mixed together. This is another example of information crossing geographic boundaries. Subsequently, the discussion between CL3 and DL3 yielded a transformation in CL4, when she stated that she would:

(n)ever have thought of linking music with museums.

This is a ‘Eureka moment’, according to our coding scheme, and represents a clear acknowledgement by CL4 of how information shared by CL3, prompted by the discussions with DL3, has transformed her thinking and has brought a new intersubjectivity regarding museums and their use of music.

In the second example where a DL (DL4) had worked in a museum, a discussion evolved that considered how museums were designed in different countries. After a period of discussion, DL4 reflected on her posts and offered an apology to the rest of the group as she felt that she may have appeared ‘patronising’ about non-UK based museums:

...I am worried now that *I sounded patronising* about museum design in other countries ... Apologies again for anything that could have potentially sounded patronising – I wasn't making a country comparison – more a comparison between museums which rely

on guides (like the one I worked in) – and museums that offer an experience that is less reliant on guides. [our emphasis]

Here DL4 is drawing on her prior professional experience and in doing so she tacitly acknowledges the alterity present within the group due to the different nationalities present. DL4 was reassured by DL5 who said:

That's okay DL4, we are *rubbing minds together learning from one another*. Thank you. [our emphasis]

This reply is an implicit acknowledgment of 'otherness' that enables the development of socially shared knowledge (Linell, 2009).

#### **4. Museum design – otherness and acknowledgment of different cultural perspectives**

Later in the same discussion DL5 answers a question about a war museum that he visited in Africa. In his answer he provides the group with his views regarding the purpose of the museum, and this view is shaped by a political context (example of otherness, and a surplus of knowledge) that he feels it is important for the others to be aware of:

Hello CL5, thank you for the question... I think [the museum] have got a good marketing ability or strategy that is why people keep coming there as a tourist centre. Basically I think that foreigners are the ones who will believe their message because *some of them are naive of the political situation* in [African country] right now. [our emphasis]

DL5 then gives a lengthy description of a war in his geographical region. His 'surplus of knowledge' is a surprise to other students and CL6 speaks of her ignorance of the context:

Hello, DL5, I've just watched the video from the official website you gave to us... Thanks for your explanations of this [war museum]. *You point surprised me that the facts in this museum are not very real*. I have the same questions with CL5 raised. *I don't really understand the background of your society*. [our emphasis]

Next CL5:

*I found your point of view very interesting* when you said that only foreigners are likely to believe the message of the museum. Is this because there is a misinterpretation of the facts or lack of transparency in presenting them? Or is the vision of the museum ironic to you because you as a citizen of the country know better of the reality? is the museum trying to fool people or is it trying to make a change in the society? I can imagine that if I visited the museum in [African country], I would definitely take the message it tries to convey for granted, but having *insider knowledge as you do can unveil many different facts that are not very obvious*. [our emphasis]

CL6 is able to compare the official website with information provided by DL5 and this can be seen as a means of helping CL6 shape her information landscape. The group then continue the discussion having been given insights by DL5, who is able to provide background, due to his prior knowledge and experience, that the others may never have become aware of that shape the discussion.

## **8.2 Summary**

These four narratives provide evidence of how different manifestations of alterity, in Linell's sense of encountering difference perspectives and unfamiliar points of view (2009), played out

in the discussion boards. Each example shows how learners were able to both offer information to others, and make judgements about contexts that they had previously been unfamiliar with, in ways that permitted the group as a whole to configure its information landscape and that allowed the group to fulfil its instrumental learning needs (a successful completion of the design task).

The dialogic encounter, and the alterity promoted by it, benefited both sets of learners. The encounter is an equal one: the on-campus learners are not being treated as the 'norm' and distance learners the exotic 'other'. Alterity is a quality present in these discussions as a whole, giving both sides of the encounter the chance to experience variation, and make judgements about information practices (Lloyd, 2010) with which they are unfamiliar. Both sides of the on- / off-campus 'divide' were able to bring informational resources, perspectives, practices and experiences that were then combined into a collective authority; judgements about the relevance of information and practices that transcended the principal locus of difference in the group, that is, their location vis-à-vis the university campus. For example, in the second narrative, on-campus learners were able to make judgements about the CM design that were more sophisticated following the inclusion of DL2's perspectives, and he was sufficiently confident to provide the information even though he had never visited the museum. Learning also resulted from tensions and strains, and new perspectives developed on both the core and alternate museum contexts: this was seen most clearly in cases 3 and 4.

Throughout these narratives, therefore, it can be seen how the various differences – or forms of alterity – existing between the groups, that locate themselves around the distance/on-campus locus of difference, provides a quality to the discussions that would not otherwise be present. The pedagogical design of this setting promotes the experience of variation, through allowing multiple voices to emerge and interact in productive ways, and helps develop the information literate practices of the group members. We have shown that the pedagogical design has been successful in providing enhanced opportunities for alterity – and that this in turn has led to the development of new intersubjectivities within the group of learners that would have been less likely to emerge from traditional classroom tasks and/or learners that did not have to bridge geographical separations. The museum activity has brought learners into contact with different contexts and obliged them to engage with different perspectives: there is a necessary dialogue that must take place, and through doing so, authority is (re)distributed throughout the group.

## 9. Conclusions and future work

Our focus in this paper was on how presenting learners with an informational task that specifically crossed the on-campus/distance learning divide allowed the quality of alterity to infuse dialogue, and to do so in various different ways. Over the course of the activity students collectively (re-)organised their information landscape to allow each other to make critical and informed judgements about contexts and chronotopes that they had no experience of prior to the start of the dialogue. The excerpts from the dialogues we presented above show how the pedagogical design of this setting, and the activities students were tasked with, allowed alterity to manifest itself as surpluses of knowledge, strains, tensions, judgements about alternative contexts and more, all of them open to reflection and scrutiny by the members of the group as they sought to develop an information landscape over which they all asserted some kind of authority. The judgements being made by, say, on-campus learners about an AM that they had not visited were still being validated by the rest of the group; this ongoing validation is an essential aspect of dialogue and the formation of information literate practice (Whitworth, 2014).

We acknowledge that these excerpts, and our analysis, do not yet account for the operations of power in this setting, particularly that asserted by the tutor (whose presence has not been a factor in this paper) and institution. However, this aspect of the environment has been investigated elsewhere (Whitworth and Webster, forthcoming). What we do claim is that the

bringing together of distance and on-campus learners, and the active use of their geographical separation as a locus of difference, enhances the alterity present in the dialogue, permits a more active exploration of variation, and promotes informed learning. The learning task allowed dialogues to take place that enhanced the quality of alterity and as a result, allowed students to experience different perspectives on a phenomenon, to have their reaction to these different experiences validated, and to use this dialogue to collectively create a learning community (for example Allan and Lewis, 2006) that was oriented to them fulfilling instrumental goals.

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