



# From face to face to distance learning: the online learner's emerging identity

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## **From face-to-face to distance learning: the online learner's emerging identity**

Over the last few years, online learning has made it possible for a new audience to access continuing education. For example in France, online Professional MAs in Language Teaching and Learning have attracted many teachers of French-as-a-foreign-language, most of them already in post abroad. The Internet allows them to enter programmes offering university-level professional qualifications. This chapter explores one such programme, launched in Grenoble in November 2006 as a partnership between the Centre National d'Enseignement à Distance (French national centre for distance education) and the University Grenoble 3. Within this programme, a module entitled 'A discourse approach to intercultural issues' offers the opportunity for researchers to collect a corpus for observing and analysing aspects of the identity of these online learners.

It is clear that, prior to enrolment in our module, the types of learning cultures surrounding most of these students, many aged around thirty, are tied in to traditional face-to-face classrooms. Their move to the online setting is a significant 'moment' which we are interested in capturing because at that point a break occurs with habits, behaviours and 'representations' (in Moscovici's understanding of the term, see below) rooted in a previous, different context. Our research methodology takes the above module as a starting point and aims to identify the main aspects of that new learning culture which could be called the 'newly networked learning culture'. We ask the students to analyse the different aspects of the learning cultures implicit in their course, based on their reflective observations, which constitute our corpus.

The following are the questions to which we would like to provide some answers here: how do we move from the situation of the traditional classroom learner to that of the online student? Which learning practices need to be deconstructed, modified, and adapted to this new context? Which new learning strategies seem to come into play at the socio-cognitive and socio-relational levels? To answer these questions, it would appear fruitful to focus precisely on this particular context of online learning. Before examining individual experiences, we will look at the different social situations which make them possible.

### **The role of the social in constructing the individual**

Following Piaget (1977) and L.S. Vygotsky (1985: 78), among others, we now know that the social dimension precedes individual knowledge:

‘Cognitive work occurs in a human, social and cultural world, and far from being independent from it, it is on the contrary strongly determined by it.’

It is upon this socio-constructivist conception that the present analysis will be based. From this point of view, our knowledge of the world is based on the ordering and organization of a world which is constituted by our individual experiences and our collective knowledge transmitted primarily through language.

Considering that our social and discursive environment influences and conditions our vision of the world (Lévi Strauss, 1985: 30), we can hypothesize that a change in learning environment will destabilise the online students who, for the first time, must face a different learning environment to that of the traditional classroom, and will give rise to an attempt on their part to adjust. The new online students will have to make adjustments to their previous

learning strategies, and it is certain aspects of those adjustments that we wish to analyse, with two different aims in mind: on the one hand, understanding how individuals integrate a new pedagogical reality; and on the other hand, addressing the following, more sociological question: how does the ‘affiliation to the job of [online] student’ (Coulon, 1993) take place? What new characteristics are brought to light in terms of online learner profiles?

### **Displayed spaces and spaces for production on the platform**

Following Vygotsky, we relate online pedagogical socialisation to the aspects of the development of the online learner’s individual identity that the different types of interaction will encourage. In order to specify more clearly which sort of environment is likely to influence the way in which this socialisation occurs for each of the learners, we will focus on the relationship between space and discourse, realised in screen and text form, using a notion that brings together spaces in which discourse is displayed to learners and spaces for their production of discourse, and which we call ‘Espace d’Exposition Discursive’ (EED)<sup>i</sup>.

Elsewhere (Develotte, 2006), we have spoken of the EED of an online teaching platform. By this we mean the digital (graphico-scriptural) environment to which online learners are exposed when they come to the platform. Whereas traditional classroom learners enter a classroom (with desks, a board, i.e. a marked-out and norm-governed social space), the online learners connect to a platform which involves a sense of ‘déjà-là’. In contrast with situations of ‘déjà-vu’, in which the individual recognizes something that s/he has already seen before, we can coin the phrase ‘déjà-là’ (already there) to indicate that what they find, when they come online, is a world that is both established (it pre-exists their arrival) and unfamiliar to them. For example, the presentation of the course by teachers or administrators, the creation

of course headings, the organisation of information and the creation of web links are all ‘already there’.

[Insert Fig 1 here]

As is clear from Figure 1, this discursive space, to which they are exposed, does not refer back to previous references in terms of learning culture (save for two or three students who have already had the experience of a similar kind of training). Also, the EED introduces a social space for teaching/learning and new discursive practices. Learner socialisation is therefore shaped both by the EED and by the teachers’ and the administrators’ discourses which take place there, before the arrival of the learners. The EED, which is also linked to didactic and pedagogical choices, conditions the form and the content of the discursive productions of the students. For example, on the Dokeos platform studied here, the courses are structured according to the following model: folders with the headings ‘activities’ and ‘work’, where the students’ monthly work is sent; and a ‘forum’ which allows students to ask questions related to the course or to other matters. More general headings allow students to communicate with each other in a ‘Récré’ (recreation) space reserved, as the name suggests, for relaxing, or for communicating with an administrator for the master’s degree at the University of Grenoble 3. It is this digital environment for socialised learning that will provide the right soil for the culture of online learning for everyone.

At this stage it is useful to compare pedagogical communication in three learning situations experienced by the students from a social point of view. The comparison, couched in terms of three variables, is summarised in Table 1 below.

	<b>Traditional classroom, co-</b>	<b>At a distance, by correspondence</b>	<b>At a distance via digital forum</b>
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	<b>presence</b>		
<b>Inter-personal communication through the synchronous written forum</b>	Direct, oral, visual	Written, on paper	Mediated through technology, poly-technical <sup>ii</sup>
<b>Teacher-learner relations</b>	Synchronous, frequent, spontaneous	Asynchronous, infrequent, programmed for regularity	Asynchronous, frequent, a degree of spontaneity possible
<b>Learner-learner relations</b>	Synchronous	Absent	Asynchronous, mediated by technology
<b>Interlocutors' perceptions</b>	Direct, sensorial,	Almost none, few clues (anonymity)	Indirect, through online interaction or information

Table 1

We start by putting forward two hypotheses, based on our foregrounding of the social over the individual, one related to the system, and the other to the individuals:

- The 'techno-semio-pragmatic' specificities (Peraya, 1998) of the learning environment will influence the sub-culture that will develop among users, and therefore influence their identity as online learners. In other words, participants will not express themselves in the same manner in cases where pedagogical communication is carried out solely via asynchronous writings (as it is in the Dokeos-mediated course being

discussed in this chapter), or via synchronous exchanges, be they text-based or multimodal. Thus it cannot be assumed that the online learning culture will be the same in these different contexts. Each digital environment is a reflection of conceptions in educational and pedagogical engineering that pre-exist the ‘arrival’ of the user. Within each, a set of specific discursive norms and conversational rituals develops, and each engenders a different ethos for the participants. Such is the first hypothesis that we wish to put forward in this study.

- Our second hypothesis is that the learners, as individuals, have an identity marked by their multiple previous experiences of learning (most frequently in traditional classroom environments) and that their characteristics (age, origin, sex) as well as their profiles (technical knowledge, personality, time available, etc.) will equally influence the social dynamics of the group. This had already begun to happen when we interviewed the learners. Here we will therefore have access to individual representations expressed by the learners, whose insertion into the social dynamics of the pedagogical forum was effected two months earlier.

Moscovici (1973) describes social representations as:

‘[...] cognitive systems with a logic and language of their own. [...] They do not represent simply “opinions about”, “images of” or “attitudes towards” but “theories” or “branches of knowledge” in their own right, for the discovery and organisation of reality, of systems of values, ideas and practices with a two-fold function: first, to establish an order which will enable individuals to orient themselves in their material world and to master it; and secondly, to enable communication to take place among

members of a community by providing them with a code for naming and classifying unambiguously the various aspects of the world and individual and group history'.<sup>iii</sup>

He stresses the need to use social representations as 'a drawbridge between the world of the individual and the social world, to relate them to the perspective of a changing world' (Moscovici, 1991, p 83, our translation).

As a psycho-social research tool, the representations of subjects engaged in a training situation have long been of interest to educational researchers (Rosenthal R. & Jacobson, L., 1971, Giordan, 1983).

Our chapter uses this framework, based on representations, as a way to approach the emerging identities of newly-networked learners. Based on the hypothesis that recurrent representations may be held up as signs of an emerging identity, our chapter will look towards identifying the representations that students in the 2006 course under consideration have of their learning, as a contribution to a description of the diversity of learner experiences online. This analysis of representations aims to help us answer the question: What are the differences and commonalities among learner variables specific to this online-learning culture?

### Context of the training

The training upon which this study is based concerns a professional master's level online training course which 'allows teachers of French as a Foreign Language to bring their professional qualifications up to date and to certify them'.<sup>iv</sup> In other words, the students, each of them already a teacher, seek to acquire a professional certification related, in this case, to online teaching/learning. They are therefore equally as interested in the form of transmission and the cognitive processes that it entails, as they are in the content of this training. Moreover,



they are all francophone and 80% of them work outside France. The specificities of the teaching/learning environment are as follows: the students receive the documents (on paper or in a pdf file) and are guided by asynchronous online tutoring in each of their eight classes. This tutorial is most often managed by the teacher who is in charge of the class (sometimes in association with one or two colleagues) and gives rise to regular interactions, with each tutor connecting around twice a week in order to answer students' questions concerning the set activities or comprehension problems in relation to the class. The class in which the data examined here was gathered, entitled 'Discursive approaches to the intercultural' offers the students a choice between continuous assessment and the writing of a final thesis or essay<sup>v</sup>. The 20 students who chose the first kind of evaluation were the subject of this study.

### The Study Corpus and the Methodology of the Analysis

The corpus of data upon which this study is based was gathered during the first activity which the online students – enrolled between 2006 and 2007 – were asked to carry out. With a view to raising their awareness of the cultural dimensions related to online learning, we encouraged them to think about the modifications introduced into their learning culture by the computer-mediated dimension of their distance study. The following is a copy of the instructions given to them:

You began this online training two months ago<sup>vi</sup>, and it is with the exploration of this teaching/learning that we will start this course. I invite you to test the techniques of reflexive analysis suggested in chapter 1 of the course<sup>vii</sup> by a self-observation of your own habits, behaviour and representations associated with online learning (in comparison to the traditional classroom teaching culture to which you were exposed

before). Try to describe your perception of anonymity, of solitary work, of the integration of the technological dimension into this type of learning (and of the temporal and spatial specificities related to this) and of every other variable you consider pertinent to understanding your experience as a learner. Do not hesitate to give suitable examples to illustrate each of your perceptions.

Twenty reflective student assessments, each about 2000 to 2500 words, were collected (without the students having access to each other's representations): 14 stated the novelty of this online learning experience for them; 3 showed experience of distance through paper-based correspondence only; and 3 had already had experience of online teaching the previous year, i.e. the first year of their two-year master's programme. For 85% of the students it is a matter therefore of their first experience of online learning. 30% of students have experience of distance learning, but for half of these it is by correspondence only. As a large majority (70%) of these learners were educated in France, where transmissive teaching is favoured, we consider that in spite of possible influences from inputs outside school they have mainly constructed their learner identity from a traditional classroom experience and that their cultural references are linked to a classic form of transmission of knowledge which privileges the contents over the learning processes.

Using the variables in Table 1, we will identify those characteristics that are brought to the fore by the students to specify the online inter-personal pedagogical relationship. Which elements in this table are mentioned by the learners? Which ones are not? Which ones are new?

From this point of view, in the following analyses we will dissociate those representations which are linked to the specificities of the pedagogical communication system from those that are more precisely linked to the socio-relational aspects of the training, thus reflecting the two

aims that we formulated earlier, of studying how individuals integrate a new pedagogical reality, and how they affiliate to the job of online student. We will thus be able, in conclusion, to draw up socio-cognitive and psycho-cognitive profiles for the learners, taking full account of the particular technological and human context of this online training.

This analysis is organized around elements collected in a thematic way from within the students' accounts. Sixteen students have been teachers for five years on average (in France or outside France) and, because of their presumed interest in learning process, can be deemed apt to give a critical and detached view of their learning experience. In order to bring to light the representations regarding relations to the technological system and interpersonal relations, we used a method consisting in dividing up each student's contribution thematically, to produce data categorised according to the columns of Table 1.

The extracts from the different students' assignments were thus juxtaposed and analysed. Within each thematic category, we found that students had expressed themselves through questions, positive critique or negative critique. We quantified the data according to these modes of expression so as to form an idea of the overall corpus analysed. (The number of students appears in each case in round brackets in the sections that follow, while square bracketed numbers identify each individual student). For each posture (questioning, positive or negative) extracts of the students' discursive productions were selected, illustrating the different themes that were broached. Through this first exploratory investigation of the corpus we seek to highlight the representations conveyed by the learners as part of their discursive productions 'zooming in' on them, as it were.

In the conclusion of the analyses of the four themes broached, we try to show how the main identity traits specific to the online learner are represented in the asynchronous online pedagogical environment under study.

We will start from the representations concerning online interpersonal communication, before dealing with those related to teacher-learner relations, then learner-learner relations and finally those which refer to the perceptions of interlocutors in this kind of discursive space.

### **Interpersonal Communication through the Synchronous Written Forum**

All of the students give their viewpoint on the particular form taken by the pedagogical communication in the Dokeos platform. We will try to see which aspects are appreciated and which receive the most negative evaluations. Among those elements mentioned by the students we will only retain those that are specific to this form of learning, and will discard for example those concerning distance only, as being applicable not only to this but also other forms of teaching (i.e. by correspondence).

Among the 20 student productions, the analysis of the extracts concerning technological communication via the forum identifies 12 responses which give negative evaluations, 7 positive evaluations, and 1 questioning evaluation.

We will therefore begin with these negative representations to try to define the different levels to which they refer.

### **The Feeling of Insecurity when Facing Technology**

The negative appreciations cover two points: the complexity of the platform (8), the difficulty of communicating via this medium (4). The first point refers to two difficulty levels: the volume of communication, and its grading on the platform: thus ‘the multiplicity of links on the platform makes it tentacular (or sprawling)’ according to one student, while another

student speaks of ‘the impression of a tangle of new information, in comparison to a traditional class in which the reactions and the remarks of the teachers or the students follow the outline of the class’. Other students mention such authors as Kafka and Ionesco in order to describe what they see as the absurd and frightening world of this online platform. Thus a general feeling of insecurity is created, contrasting with the level of organisation that learners experienced in their previous studies.

[5] Firstly I had the feeling of being invaded by an unpredictable flux of heterogeneous information and modalities, for which I had to keep searching, with the feeling nonetheless that I had no control at all over the situation; or partial control at best. How do we explain the mind-blowing cognitive insecurity?

Perhaps predictably, the technical problems are addressed (8) both in terms of the weaknesses of the teaching system, and in terms of the learners’ own limitations in the use of technology (2). Thus 3 students (located in Asia) mentioned the connection problems caused by an earthquake which occurred on the 26<sup>th</sup> of December 2006, one of the consequences of which was the rupturing of the underwater optic cables carrying the greater part of the Internet connections, thereby interrupting the online pedagogical communication for 10 days. These two levels of difficulty enter into what Kupersmith (2003) calls ‘technostress’, pointing, perhaps, to the need for a further study designed to check if there exists a relation between the students’ technical competence and the expression of their feeling of insecurity. It is, in any case, a hypothesis worth putting forward: that the lesser the technical knowledge, the greater the stress among the students examined here.

### **Perceptions of unequal appropriation of the communication environment**

The images associated with the forum as a place of discursive production are seen very differently by different students. Some find it easier to express themselves (7):

[10] The use of forums breaks barriers and inhibitions. There is no longer a gulf between those who dare and those who don't dare speak up. I'm someone who is usually reserved in front of a large group, and for me this tool is reassuring.

Other students (5), however, feel inhibited while using the platform:

[13] Sending a message on the Dokeos platform amounts to hurling oneself into the void, with no chance of checking the pertinence of a question by seeing the reactions of your interlocutors. By writing a message, we must accept a much larger part of responsibility for what we say: once the message is sent, we cannot change it, even if we have realized that we have made an error. I think that I can analyze this attitude as a sort of apprehension of 'the other', an uneasiness to which I react by asking fewer questions than I would if I were in a classroom.

These images are very varied and the way that they evolve would merit a study of its own. In this way, it might be possible to find out whether reactions like those of student [13] are temporary, linked to the initial discovery factor, or whether they are likely to become permanent, associated with the ethos that this individual built up through the use of the specific instrument that is the platform for teaching.

It is often the case that the same aspect is seen in different ways by the students. For example, the public character of the statements on the forum can be felt as a lack of confidentiality or, on the contrary, as an integral sharing of the training process between the students.

[11] The forums [...] lack a dimension of confidentiality. Sometimes I compensated by contacting the other member of the work group by email.

[4] What I particularly like is the fact that nothing is hidden or well-guarded, like it is when we are in a classroom where sometimes only a few students can benefit from the information given, since the questions which are posed outside of courses and classrooms don't circulate to every student and, similarly, don't necessarily make it to the ears of the teachers. But in the case of distance learning, both the teachers and the students participate regularly in all of the online 'dialogues'.

Similarly, the asynchronous aspect of exchanges is liable to trigger positive or negative reactions; according to the students:

[20] There is no immediate feedback from the teacher, each participant is always waiting for the response from a professor, from a student, or from a member of the administration.

[1] The asynchronous style teaches us to be patient and to organize our work in advance so that we take into account the time we must wait before we receive a response.

One area for further exploration suggested by our findings – which are limited by the broad view that we have adopted in this study – would be to refine the grain of the analysis by including biographical details relating to the learners' previous educational experiences, their affinities or otherwise for using technology, their orientation to autonomous learning etc.

### **Indicators of a change of culture**

To conclude this first part about interpersonal relations online, we have tried to indicate two examples of students' impressions which may, it seems to us, be precursors to cultural changes in the domain of learning. The first example is that of a student who asks herself the following questions:

[3] I also asked myself about certain aspects of the operation of the platform, in particular about the possibility of seeing who is connected and about the recording of the frequency of our connections. Does knowing that others are online, without being able to come in contact with them, serve to maintain the motivation of the group or, rather, to consolidate a sentiment of belonging to a community, for example? As for the information about our connections, I suppose that it permits the teachers to judge the 'health' of the platform by means of statistics.



In effect, these questions attest to the technical culture of this student<sup>viii</sup>; her inferences relate to the limits of the platform, on one hand, and, on the other hand, to the functions of control linked to the system of technological traces. The majority of teachers do not use the statistical information about students' connections, but the totality of this student's productions must, presumably, take place while she has in mind the possibility that somebody (teacher or administrator) could lurk and check what she is doing while she works on the platform. Such potential checks undeniably form part of the available technico-discursive machinery. In our opinion, these remarks may be considered as a beginning of changes to the image of what a pedagogical exchange is, when in the form of an online version.

In the same vein, the ideas of the student below indicate that her perception of writing has changed because of her experience using the platform.

[13] While I would allow myself to ask spontaneous questions in class, when learning online I prefer to put my doubts to one side and think about the question myself or else re-read the notes I took to find the response. It's only when I'm sure of my incomprehension of the subject that I ask the question on the platform; this clearly makes questioning much less impulsive. My vision of what writing is surely enters into the game, here. Indeed, I am used to informal exchanges when writing in a personal style (letters, chats, diverse synchronous exchanges), but, in my thinking process, writing in a university setting is immediately associated with work that is definitive, thought-out, constructed, and often liable to be evaluated. Whereas I see oral communication as a system of propositions, of hypotheses, of reflections, and of questioning, written trial and error is difficult for me to envision. As it

were, I feel that I have less of a right to make a mistake when writing than when speaking. The discussion forum at the university is thus another perturbing element in my cognitive process, since its goal is to be a system of exchanges of doubts and questions that are written. Accounting for my thoughts on the matter, sending a message on the platform is, for me, taking a singular risk which requires more tolerance of uncertainty than one would find in oral participation in a classroom learning situation.

The relation to writing is ingrained in our social practices and it models our behaviors. Throughout the reflections above, one perceives the necessity of a cultural appropriation of this new relationship to writing online in the context of learning. This type of writing distinguishes itself from traditional writing in the university because of its more spontaneous character that is less determined by a search for formal perfection.

### ***Teacher-learner relations***

Concerning relationships with the teachers, the students express ideas that relate to the idea of greater freedom of expression online, which goes back to the ‘hyperpersonal interaction’ described by Walther (1996). This aspect, i.e. relations that are more relaxed than they are in the classroom, was noted by nine students.

[19] The relationships between the students and the teachers are friendlier and more relaxed. The latter are also present on the *Qui est qui (Who is Who)* forum. Mr. M. uses smileys to wink at us, Mr. C. jokes around...[...] The

online relationship helps to lose inhibitions. I say things that I would never permit myself to say in a classroom (what I am in the process of writing for you, for example); things like humor, critique. [...] There are failures of communication due to technical problems (disappearance of forums ;-)<sup>ix</sup> (would I ever make such an allusion in a classroom, and wink at you?))

The teacher thus appears paradoxically, ‘closer and more accessible despite the distance and the asynchronicity.’ One can also link this aspect to the fact that the teachers were implicated in the conception of the pedagogical communication environment and that they had deliberately chosen a form of tutorial support that was apt to support students in a socio-affective manner.

### ***Learner-learner relations***

All 20 students mention the new type of relation that distance learning establishes with other students, if only because they were surprised, like the following individual:

[19] The image of distance learning that I had was very different. First, I imagined only a teacher/student relationship. But I realized that one enters into a new mode of learning in which interaction and collaborative work have an essential place. Thus, there is a strong support system: tutorial support, exchanges (forums, chats, collaborative groups). At no time did I ever think of exchanges between students.

Three sub-themes are addressed in the framework of relationships between students: first and foremost collective work, then solidarity and the feeling of non-competition, and, finally, the absence of conversations outside of class.

## **Collective Work**

90% of the students dedicate a part of their reflections to collective work, which thus appears to be the element which is perceived as most prominent in the relationship between students. Indeed, 18 students are interested in work which brought them to co-operate in an activity with another student. The evaluations of this aspect of relationships in distance learning are varied: seven students had a negative judgment of this type of work, six mentioned their interest, two expressed a feeling of being perplexed, and three others had negative impressions at the start, which evolved during the course to become more positive at the end. The following are examples of positions concerning the difficulty which was most often cited (10), that is, the difficulty of choosing a work partner to make up a pair.

[11] I would express my reservations most especially with the work done in pairs or in groups. We need to collaborate with one or several other people chosen in a completely random way. It is true that we have a description of each person on the forum at our disposal, but ultimately that doesn't say much about the personality of the individual and whether or not we are going to be able to get along.

Henri<sup>x</sup> thinks, after more than twenty years analyzing the process of online collaboration, that collaboration requires preparation and that it is necessary to teach students how to collaborate

and to make sure that stages are not skipped, because these are useful in preparing for later work.

In only one case did the difficulty mentioned come from a student's own limitations:

[5] Collaborative work is still difficult for me [...]. I admit, of course, that I have an independent personality, difficulties with delegation and trust, and even a need for control

The students also make a link between other ways of communication (outside of the platform) and the collective work in pairs (6). We will see, with the following examples, that they demonstrate initiative and appropriation of the different tools at their disposal in order to adjust themselves as much as possible to the constraints of communication:

[18] Time-management was the triggering factor of reorganization in the communication. The multitude of details to deal with in our pair work made it necessary to move to synchronous exchanges via Windows Messenger.

The problems with time-management in these types of training courses are mentioned by all of the students. Similar difficulties are discussed by Thorpe (2006: 506), who adds that 'Conferencing and on-line tutorials can also add to study workload if they are not well-moderated or well-structured. More time is required to read large numbers of messages when conferences are not tightly threaded or a tutor does not weave together the themes effectively or summarize and guide the discussion.' Certainly the pedagogical communication environment that is offered to the students is capable of improvement in numerous ways. Indeed these communicative protocols are not stabilized for the teacher and educational

designers either, and they try without cease to improve them, through attention to developments highlighted in studies like the current one.

In addition to the temporal variable that is cited by students to justify moving over to other modes and tools of communication, there is also a need to compare one's thoughts and feelings concerning the training courses with those of others.

[17] I notice that I immediately reintroduced a 'corporal' and 'perceptible' dimension into my group, notably by using a communication tool that is synchronous and 'more human': the telephone. Failing being in the physical presence of someone, it allows us to be in contact with a voice, with something that is alive, which is also reassuring.

Here we meet the need to share emotions socially (Rimé, 2005), the lack of which was mentioned in several ways by the students.

## **Solidarity/Absence of Competition**

Several students (5) mention their surprise or their pleasure when they were helped by other students.

[6] Having received my courses two months after the beginning of the training course, I felt very alone when faced with my learning. Happily, two students sent me messages of support and encouragement, which really surprised me but also 'remotivated' me. I think, here, that distance learning allows this type

of intervention more easily than classroom learning. Would I have had the support of two perfect strangers in a classroom situation?

This expression of solidarity among students, which is surprising for a teacher who is used to classroom culture, seems to be something that is quite specific to learning online; we can link it with the reduced feeling of competition which was also noted by several students.

### **The loss of socialising time in-between formal face-to-face sessions**

The uniquely ‘professional’ character of the relationships between students on the teaching platform is highlighted (4):

[6] One of the disadvantages of distance learning is that the contact remains linked only to the training course. Personal connections, which are also a source of motivation, are absent.

It is clear, then, that the lack of relationships with the other students is felt most often in the motivational and social aspects which help to share emotions (e.g. stress or others).

[6] I also think that, when everyone is physically present, information circulates more easily than in distance learning. In a classroom, while waiting for a teacher, for example, or during the breaks, the students chat and exchange information very easily and naturally. [...] So it’s not very reassuring to work alone, in front of a computer that will never say to you, ‘In fact, you had

started working on...' or, 'You handed in...', or even, 'This assignment is really hard...', how did you start it?', etc.

It seems that in separating recreational topics ('Récré') from 'serious' topics and putting them into different 'boxes', the platform through its structures has broken with the usual mix that is customary in on-site classes. These bring together the speeches and lectures in the classroom with the talk that goes on in the hallway or the cafeteria. Perhaps on future distance teaching/distance learning platforms, such EEDs, which are more hybrid, will become prevalent if the demand for them highlights their pedagogical importance.

### ***Constructing one's interlocutor***

Among the themes that we had suggested to students as ways of structuring their accounts of their experience with distance learning was the theme of anonymity, which, in my thinking as a distance teacher for the last five years, was an important element to consider when looking at the perceptions (or, rather, the non-perceptions) of the interlocutors on the platform. In fact it seems that anonymity is not a pertinent theme because more than half of the students (11/20) do not feel that this form of distance learning conveys a feeling of anonymity (the other nine do not address this theme):

[17] I construct images of personalities from the information that each person gives, so as to adapt to this change and recreate a universe that mixes the known and the unknown.



[3] Names took on a face because some people included a photo on their course blog (for the '*Computer-assisted collective learning course*').

[5] On Dokeos, one can read not only detailed answer keys and personal information, but also warm exchanges and links to personal sites. I myself have googled the names of teachers in order to know more about their academic careers and frames of mind. Thus, according to the success of my searches, sometimes I do my work with faces and sometimes I do it while trying to guess the personality traits of my partners. Both ways are pleasant.

It is interesting to see the way in which the students restore reality to their professors who are not present (i.e. who are connected to the forum) by using online or imaginary information; the virtual here takes on its true meaning. But it shows the necessity of having an image of the other which is projected or otherwise seen in order to experience a pedagogical relationship online, at least for some people.

[19] I also find it funny that I imagine faces by using others' introductions of themselves, their questions, and their personalities (although some people have put their picture on their blog).

For one of the students, the people who remain anonymous are those who don't frequently use the forum; for the others, clues allow the imagination to compensate for the lack of information to which we are accustomed in on-site learning:

[8] Style or tonality are revealing, and one cannot neglect what might appear while reading between the lines. [...] This student seems to be in a hurry because there are several typos in his text. That one is not coherent in his usage of typography. Another one takes great care that her text flows and her paragraphs are airy. Or a recurring error shows a non-native speaker.

It would be helpful to try to find out with greater accuracy whether all of the students experience this, what form this experience takes, and what role this imaginary projection plays in the learning process (motivational level, etc.). In the last part of our study, we will examine the traces of individual appropriations of a new learning culture generated by the passage to on-line/distance learning. This emerging learning culture foreshadows new learning identities, which are currently being constructed.

### ***Emerging identities***

Our aim in undertaking this study was to answer questions about the move from classroom learner to online student, and in particular to identify new learning practices and strategies, coming into play at the socio-cognitive and socio-relational levels. In the final section, we now address these two dimensions.

### **On the Socio-cognitive Level**

It is interesting to note the differences between that which, according to the students (5), is seen as the ‘good performance’ of an online learner and the real behaviors which

have been adopted up to this point in the course (i.e. two months after the start). Here is an example:

[19] Although the didactic intentions of this training course aim for student/student and student/teacher interactions, I prefer student/teacher exchanges most of the time. However, I remain persuaded that the best way to learn is to get involved actively. So, why didn't I play the game?

This understanding of the issues and of the modalities of teaching is not enough to reorient the work habits that have been ingrained for many years, as the same student makes explains:

[19] The first reason, I think, is that I was used to the traditional teacher/knowledge/student triangle, and that the change of enunciative scene in through technological mediation was difficult. The second reason is my lack of self-assurance as a learner. The sanction of success and of failure can be destabilizing when one is an adult. As a result, I no longer have confidence in my co-learners. How can they have a response to my question when they aren't professors? To give advice to other students seemed pretentious to me.

This narration is in the past tense because the student later explains in what manner her impressions evolved to lead to behaviors that were more adapted to the pedagogical situation online. We are now going to give a few examples of new strategies of learning which emerged in order to respond, in an adapted way, to the pedagogical communication mechanism.

## **On the Psycho-cognitive level**

The five students who announce their learning strategies all start from the necessity of reconfiguring their way of learning, allowing for the disappearance of elements which they used as part of the framework of a classroom situation.

[13] In order to catch up with my learning strategies in the classroom, I had the use of new strategies to simulate interactions: not only did I decide to proceed with creating personal evaluations in the form of tests that reproduce the system of questioning someone else, but I also forced myself to evaluate my appropriation of knowledge by regularly speaking out loud and imagining myself to be in the middle of explaining the situation to someone.

In these examples we see the fundamental role that imagination plays in the capacity to leave behind the strategies which were previously used in other learning situations and which are, in distance learning, seen as ineffective and thus in need of modification. Sometimes, however, the students are less advanced in their appropriation of these strategies, and they note their helplessness in sticking to the student model that they had previously intuited:

[5] Being the 2<sup>nd</sup>-year postgraduate student that I am, I must now confess that I print most of the forum discussions, the activities, the links, and the documents, and I put them in a folder with a multitude of colored inserts. If I do nothing, I still fear that an important announcement will escape the clicks of my mouse. It is the obsession of wanting to manage and master everything. In

the next few months, I am surely going to need to accept the fact that this is no longer possible, that one cannot work with this illusion in one's head.'

One may note the guilt attached to the non-respect of that which is implicitly established as the 'good behavior' of the online student. This emotion is in fact representative of a multitude of others (among which we find stress, frustration, a feeling of insecurity) that are generated by the period at the beginning of an online learner's career. Five students associate discomfort with interest (in the description of their experience), as in the following example:

[2] I find the experience oppressive but interesting. To break from one routine to find another brings about new methods of work and allows me to really sort out the things I usually do effectively from the ones I do less effectively.

These impressions reflect the work of Rebecca Oxford (2003), who showed that distance-learning students are more likely to develop strategies than other students. From a didactic point of view, it would be interesting to use the diversity of the behaviors described by the students as the first changes that they had to make upon becoming online learners, as a basis for inciting future newly registered students to develop their own method of learning.

### **On the psycho- and socio-relational level**

Winkin speaks of an 'invisible college' to designate the informal network of researchers who opened up new avenues for studying communication in the 1970s. To use his idea, we can speak of 'invisible colleagues' who link the students on line with a learning community. These invisible colleagues are not only present in their physical absence, but they generate

expectations and interests that are reconfigured by the technologized discursive mise-en-scène. In other words the platform as a specific social space sets a physical scene within which these particular expectations and interests are enhanced. Throughout the entirety of the short duration of the training course (six months), teachers and students are linked by space (discursive platform space) and time to this type of communication: at any hour, day or night, one can potentially communicate, responses are possible, and a kind of quasi-continuous expectation of vigilance or attentiveness is generated, which is specific to this environment. 'It is necessary to add to my palpable social network the reality of a second, virtual network in which I must regularly make an effort to participate,' says one student.

What we are trying to bring to light in this chapter is the modification of the social dynamic that results from the fact that learning no longer takes place on-site, but instead takes place online. The EED of a pedagogical platform exposes the students to communication methods that often elicit reactions of stress and insecurity, at least at the start. However, we were able to note that new learning methods are appearing, making up for the loss of old reference points, which came from on-site situations, by constructing behaviors that are adapted to online situations. In relation to the new context of learning, these socio-cognitive adjustments may be facilitated by the emergence of metacognition, which is enabled by the self-reflection and personal learning strategies that are necessary when managing one's path of study alone (Oxford, 1990). The online student is thus developing identity traits that are different than those which s/he previously had when s/he was an on-site student. Also, a new relationship to knowledge is being put into place through the dynamics of on-line learners' interactions, of which we have shown several aspects such as the change in the relationship to writing. Finally, new behaviours arise, e.g. more convivial interpersonal relationships between teachers and students, and less competitive, more connected, interpersonal relationships

between students. The latter are supported by various communication forms (email, chat, telephone) as a function of the message to be transmitted. We thus notice that technological mediation includes the majority of practices, as in the example of ‘googling’ teachers to find a few bits of information about their interests.

Our findings reveal some of the constituents of the learning cultures of newly-networked online learners. Seen from the two perspectives that have guided our work in this chapter (their adjustment to the new pedagogical environment and their affiliation to their new job of online learner), these constituents can be linked to:

- emotion (e.g. insecurity-provoking contact with the environment, and the ambivalent feelings about contact with others, both socio-affectively and in collective tasks)
- heightened awareness of the self in transition, particularly when former cultures are perceived to conflict with online needs or opportunities (e.g. in relation to writing, to new-found informality with teachers or to compensating for the disappearance of physical hallways and embodied interlocutors).

The asynchronous online student is forging a complete identity; and it is up to the educational researchers to explore it, in order to better respond to its specificities.

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<sup>i</sup> In stressing the screen and text-related interpretation that we give to the phrase 'espace d'exposition discursive', and encapsulating it in an acronym, we intend to set it apart from the notion of 'discursive space', as known e.g. in discursive psychology.

<sup>ii</sup> That is by using, from the technical point of view, different communication tools (email, telephone...).

<sup>iii</sup> Moscovici, Serge (1973) foreword to C. Herzlich, Health and Illness: a Social Psychological Analysis, London, Academic Press, p.xiii.

<sup>iv</sup> Extract from the course description on the website of the CNED (<http://www.cned.fr>).

<sup>v</sup> This approach to assessment would have in itself have implications for the cultural dimension of this online course, but student data does not refer to it, and it is therefore excluded from the present study.

<sup>vi</sup> The course began with 6 tutorials. Two months later 3 further tutorials others were added, among which were those taught by the author and under study in this chapter. Therefore while the instructions quoted here relate to assessment for the author's first tutorial, the students had by that stage already experienced online tutorials by other tutors.

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<sup>vii</sup> ‘Didactique du FLE et approches discursives de l’interculturel’, Masters in Linguistics, 2<sup>nd</sup> year, CNED-Université Stendhal-Grenoble 3.

<sup>viii</sup> While the question of whether and how the community is being tracked may have been in the awareness of more students than just the one quoted here, and therefore may have played a role in shaping the collective learning culture, we have not found empirical traces of this in our data and have therefore had to leave this question aside.

<sup>ix</sup> This refers to a previous error on my part, in which I caused the content of the forum to disappear.

<sup>x</sup> Henri, F., conférence plénière au colloque de l’AIPU, Montréal, 17 mai 2007

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