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Résumé de l'article

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Making Distance Visible: Assembling Nearness in an Online Distance Learning Programme

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Abstract

Online distance learners are in a particularly complex relationship with the educational institutions they belong to (Bayne, Gallagher, & Lamb, 2012). For part-time distance students, arrivals and departures can be multiple and invisible as students take courses, take breaks, move into independent study phases of a programme, find work or family commitments overtaking their study time, experience personal upheaval or loss, and find alignments between their professional and academic work. These comings and goings indicate a fluid and temporary assemblage of engagement, not a permanent or stable state of either "presence" or "distance".

This paper draws from interview data from the "New Geographies of Learning" project, a research project exploring the notions of space and institution for the MSc in Digital Education at the University of Edinburgh, and from literature on distance learning and online community. The concept of nearness emerged from the data analyzing the comings and goings of students on a fully online programme. It proposes that "nearness" to a distance programme is a temporary assemblage of people, circumstances, and technologies. This state is difficult to establish and impossible to sustain in an uninterrupted way over the long period of time that many are engaged in part-time study. Interruptions and subsequent returns should therefore be seen as normal in the practice of studying as an online distance learner, and teachers and institutions should work to help students develop *resilience* in negotiating various states of nearness. Four strategies for increasing this resilience are proposed: recognising nearness as effortful; identifying affinities; valuing perspective shifts; and designing openings.

Keywords : Online learning; distance education; e-learning; higher education

Introduction

This paper is about the complex relationships that online distance learners have with the educational institutions and programmes they belong to (Bayne, Gallagher, & Lamb, 2012), and how these relationships can be made visible. Visibility provides educators a vantage point from which to theorize and work with these relationships and to help students develop the resilience required to manage different states of nearness they will experience. The first step working with these complex relationships is to assert that they are never static, even if students are in a geographical situation that looks, from the point of view of those on or interested in the material campus, simply "distant". There are intellectual and emotional distances that must be crossed in order to "arrive" on a programme and to engage with it. We argue in this paper that engagement oscillates through a continuum of nearness and distance, and that while nearness appears to represent the desired position, it is neither a fixed state, nor one whose meaning is stable. "Nearness" must continually be *assembled*, as online distance learners progress through the stages of formalized degree programmes and balance their other professional and personal commitments. There are elements of the assemblage – technological, relational, emotional, spatial – that can disrupt or bolster the resilience that students need to be able to manage the varying degrees of nearness to their programme that they experience over time.

We are defining resilience as the ability to navigate conditions of complexity and change. In practice, in this context, this mostly means that the student keeps going and successfully achieves the qualification sought. Sometimes it may mean making a positive choice that the course of study is not suitable, or not workable under the student's circumstances. Resilience is needed not to preserve or stabilise nearness, which is neither possible nor desirable, but to navigate the different levels of engagement that are a normal part of the experience of studying on a part-time, online distance programme. Most definitions of the term emphasise a core identity which is resistant to, or "absorbs" change (Weller & Anderson, 2013), but we argue that many factors, human and non-human, contribute to the possibility of resilience.

Online distance learning is primarily understood as the state of being "absent from the institutional space" (Raddon, 2006, p. 161). However obvious it may appear, this understanding is problematic, because it draws attention away from what *is*, towards what is *not*. Equally problematic, common assumptions about the spontaneous and portable nature of learning at a distance (Selwyn, 2011, p. 380) obscure the complexities of engagement and participation that constitute the distance learner's experience. Raddon (2007) describes a "key story" in narratives of distance students as being about "developing a level of flexibility about when, where and how they engage in paid work, and about taking personal responsibility for their development and future ability to remain in work by engaging in distance learning studies" (p. 77), drawing attention to the centrality of work in the lives of distance learners. And Selwyn's research with students on 'independent study' type distance programmes, where contact and collaboration are not required, found that students "were more accurately described as

striving to develop rigid procedures and fixed routines of studying" (2011, p. 380), even though they described flexibility as a key factor in their choice of study mode. Raddon and Selwyn are attempting to render the practices of distance education more visible, and putting them in their social and historical context, which inevitably leads to a more complex and richer picture of what it means to be a student at a distance. It also exposes tensions: These two authors present overlapping and possibly contradictory variables that may be institution-, programme- or even student-specific. In this paper, we offer insights from another context – one of a programme where the expectations of participation and contact are quite different from Selwyn's programmes, but where students must negotiate many of the same demands and pressures that both he and Raddon describe. We propose to view both distance and nearness as temporary assemblages.

Our argument is illustrated within a particular context: the MSc in Digital Education at the University of Edinburgh, a fully online programme designed for educators and learning technologists to explore learning, teaching, and training in digital environments[1]. Data used in this paper, comprising transcripts from 20 interviews, are drawn from the "New Geographies of Learning" project[2], a research project exploring the role of space and geography in online learning.

Online learners in formal programmes have to weather fluctuations in time and intensity in their engagements with the course. Often, these engagements and disengagements are multiple and invisible as people take courses, take breaks, move into the dissertation phase of the programme, find work or family commitments overtaking their study time, experience personal upheaval or loss, find alignments between their professional and academic work, graduate or withdraw. For part-time students, these comings and goings occur over several years. The MSc in Digital Education programme, designed with elements of flexibility in its presentation and progression, explicitly permits these engagements and disengagements, on the understanding that working, mature students are likely to need to pause their studies at some point during their three or more years on the programme. This permission may be explicit, but engagement and discussion with students about what it means, and what is needed, for them to come and go in this way may not be addressed so explicitly. In mediated, mostly asynchronous communication environments, it can also be difficult for teachers and peers to notice these shifts taking place, because silence may or may not denote absence, and so the resilience required of students is compounded by the online nature of the programme.

In addition, there is a group of students who start the programme together each year, taking the introductory "foundational" course over their first semester, but students then move at different paces and choose different paths through the programme, and sometimes do not work with members of this cohort again for some time, if at all,

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[1] http://online.education.ed.ac.uk/
[2] http://edinspace.weebly.com

potentially leading to feelings of alienation or autonomy, depending on the student. The programme team on the MSc in Digital Education has attempted to mitigate possible fragmentation of the student group by working to make programme-wide digital spaces where a sense of togetherness can be built. Taught courses are a time of intensive collaboration and discussion, and new connections are forged during each of these. Strong affinities are created and sustained between students, and alumni are welcomed and included in the community. Nevertheless, the experience of distance in a relational, rather than a geographical, sense is one that most students will experience at some time or another on the programme.

In light of the challenging context of these arrivals, departures, and returns, universities offering online distance programmes, and teachers running them, can benefit from ways of thinking that attune them to the shifting relationships that students have with their formal programmes and their peers, and design strategies that build upon these comings and goings – viewing "nearness" as a temporary state that is assembled from particular combinations of people, circumstances, and technologies. The programme can be more or less central at different times, and different states of centrality can be seen as normal, natural, and even desirable. The concept of resilience is, in a sense, one way of making this complexity of comings and goings visible and designing strategies to support it. This paper proposes a number of such strategies for fostering resilience, by exploring how teachers and institutions can support students to cope with different degrees of nearness on distance programmes, drawing on relevant themes that emerged from the research data. Namely, this paper will be framed within the context of students' leaving and returning, and the process of students engaging with and disengaging from the programme. Research on the experiences of distance learners and the enactment of departures from online communities will be highlighted, interview data presented and discussed, and some positions that teachers might take in relation to an awareness of the shifting nature of their students' nearness to the programme will be proposed.

First, we briefly outline concepts – assemblages and departures – that inform our proposal that online distance learning should be viewed in the context of "assemblages of nearness".

Assemblages

In theories of sociomateriality, assemblages figure prominently. Fenwick and Landri (2012) describe most phenomena as being

> hybrid assemblages of materials, ideas, symbols, desires, bodies, natural forces, etc. that are always active, always reconstituting themselves. Sociomaterial studies shift the conversation from issues defined by the personal and the social to questions about these assemblages, how they move, and how they produce what may appear to be

> distinct objects, subjects, and events. How and why do certain combinations of things come together to exert particular effects? ...How do some assemblages become stable, and what force do they wield? (p. 3)

We argue that the assemblage that constitutes nearness in online distance learning is inherently unstable and temporary. In part this is because of what Bregman and Haythornthwaite (2003) call the "radicals of presentation" – the "root characteristics" of the genre of online environments (p. 122). In particular, they draw attention to the radical of visibility, of representation of self – and the effort required to avoid "'fading back'... becoming invisible so that the only trace left is a 'name on a screen'" (p. 130).

Its instability also stems from currently prominent discourses of "flexibility and insecurity" (Raddon, 2007) which inform the assumptions of distance learners about how their time and attention can and should be deployed across boundaries of work, study, and private time. These discourses suggest particular orientations to study which, as Selwyn (2011) has found, do not necessarily reflect the real practices and experiences of distance learners – they are "presumed flexibilities" (p. 367).

Finally, it is unstable because participation inevitably waxes and wanes multiple times over long periods of engagement such as those on the MSc in Digital Education. All of these factors are part of the assemblage of nearness: time; context; personal engagement; and the nature of the online environment.

Departures

Research on "departures" or "disengagements" from online communities is extremely useful in framing some of the issues of interest in this paper. Kazmer's work on disengagement from online educational programmes (2004, 2007) is particularly helpful, as is the small body of literature that explores departures (temporary and permanent) from multiplayer online games such as World of Warcraft (Dutton, 2007; Lee et al., 2007; Webber, 2012).

Kazmer describes certain sorts of social worlds (including educational ones) as "intrinsically transient" (2007, p. 112), by which she means that all those who participate do so with the expectation that such participation will be for a limited time only. The process of disengaging from such social worlds starts early – indeed, it is encoded in the arrival in the world – and involves both practical and emotional aspects (Kazmer, 2004). However, she focuses on one permanent disengagement, marked by graduation, rather than multiple temporary ones. Even where relationships continue afterwards, they are relationships in a new "social world":

> Students earning a master's degree in library and information science might be expected to join the social world of information professionals. That would be their

> logical next world. It is possible, also, to have more than one logical next world. These students might also be expected to join the social world of alumni who graduated from the same program. (2007, p. 115)

Kazmer's model partly accounts for less clear-cut departures, but pathologises those who enact them as "problematic disengagers" – people who do not depart successfully within the parameters of what is considered normal for that social world (2007, p. 130).

In gaming contexts, particularly in massive multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs), the practice of "quitting" is viewed as highly nuanced. Quitting can be spontaneous in response to frustration (so-called "ragequits"), and temporary (even if presented as permanent), and can involve both complex rituals of departure and sudden, sometimes permanent silences (Webber, 2012). Dutton (2007) describes three discourses of departure in what he calls "quitting texts", communications from departing players to the gaming community at large or a particular group of players in particular. These are: "virtual suicides" (where game characters are permanently deleted), "goodbyes" (nostalgic recollections and farewells), and "critiques" (criticisms of the game and attributions of blame for the departure). He explores how each of these types of quitting text is presented and received within game communities. As Webber says, departures (even if framed as permanent) are often received with skepticism, as it is so common for 'permanent' quitters to return – sometimes in a very short period of time (2012, p. 7). These practices of gaming departures are likely quite different from the ways in which students depart from formalised programmes of study, but the idea that "quitting" is complex and not always permanent is one that is highly relevant to our study.

We now move on to analyse interview data, exploring the ways in which comings and goings are described by distance students. It is important to remember as we proceed through these following sections that learners will move simultaneously between states of nearness and distance and presence and absence, respectively. These movements through these states are constructions, or assemblages, of their attachments to formalized programmes of study. The interview data presented here suggests that these comings and goings are in constant negotiation and are constantly being assembled; it is critical for teachers and organizations to recognise and work with this instability as they seek to help their students build resilience.

Assemblages of Nearness: Arrivals, Returns, and Spaces and Places

In this section, we present interview data that demonstrates some of the complexity of nearness involved in the practice of being a part-time, distance student on a contact-rich programme like the MSc in Digital Education.

The MSc is an accredited postgraduate programme at the University of Edinburgh, which has been offered entirely online since 2006. This is a programme with high levels of recruitment and student satisfaction, and a global spread reaching across 40 countries. We generated qualitative data with 28 individuals who are current students on the programme, or very recent graduates. Twenty interviewees were recruited to the study from a group of 150 current and recent participants, with an opportunistic emphasis on eliciting data across all years of study, and a global spread.[3] We used narrative methods within a series of online, text-based interviews[4] to explore with students the tales of their own arrival at Edinburgh at the start of their studies, seeking talk which related specifically to students' construction of the spatiality of the distance mode, and their conception of the institutional presence of the university. The notion of arrival was used in this context deliberately to problematise the association of study with a fixed academic geography, but it also had the unexpected effect of highlighting how students experienced multiple points of arrival (and departure) through their time on programme. Transcripts from the text chat were anonymised, pseudonyms allocated, and the data were collaboratively and thematically coded using the online software Dedoose. Some of these themes are illustrated here, with the use of verbatim extracts from the text chat transcripts.

One consistent theme found in most of these transcripts was resilience, a capacity for navigating changing states of nearness and distance, presence and absence. Resilience can be viewed as an assemblage itself, an intersection of nearness or distance, of presence or absence, and of a capacity for navigating this fluid terrain. Resilience is a critical element for teachers or organizations to identify and build strategies for developing in their students.

Arrivals

Many interviewees described their arrival on the programme as complex. For some it happened more than once, and for one not really at all. These accounts are intended to demonstrate the variations in how students may experience their arrivals on an online distance programme, underscoring the need for practices that support resilience to be flexible enough to take such difference into account.

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[3] Students participated in the research from Australia, Croatia, Italy, Japan, Korea, Mexico, Nigeria, Poland, Spain, Tanzania, UK, and the USA.

[4] The interviews were conducted one-to-one via text chat in Skype.

Preparing for arrival can be a process of alignment, as day-to-day life is restructured to accommodate new demands and experiences. This process is different from that of students who will travel to a campus to study full-time for a period, but where prospective online distance students recognise this possibility, they may engage in planning that sounds not dissimilar to preparing for a journey. Lorrie believed that planning to undertake the programme required a significant period of restructuring her life in order to accommodate it – a pre-arrival period that lasted a full year:

> I was preparing myself physically for a year before I decided to apply.
>
> Interviewer: Preparing yourself? How do you mean?
>
> Well, this study requires lots of time, so I had to figure out in my head how it would fit into my personal and business life. Also I had to prepare myself that I'm going to take an obligation that is serious and I want to do it as best as I can. (Lorrie Saterfiel)

It is not uncommon for students to plan to begin, or actually start on programme, and then find they have to defer due to unexpected events. Lilia described what this was like for her, an example of a temporary disengagement predicated by a reconfiguration of a work/life balance:

> I arrived late and got most things wrong.
>
> That was mostly because I'd had a super intense summer, professionally and privately too, certain things went wrong and I was exhausted.
>
> I was supposed to study full-time but ended up doing just one course... half way through the course I decided not to continue.
>
> It was amazing how much support I got from the whole team.
>
> ...anyway, i resumed in January.
>
> The arrival was easier in a way as I'd already rehearsed it. (Lilia Banton)

Online arrival can be disrupted, and it can also be somewhat fuzzy, if the "assemblage" of nearness does not emerge coherently right away. Selena remembered the first few weeks of the course as a 'blur' due to being ill and away from home:

> I was actually in the States during the orientation period,
> and I participated as much as I could I was undergoing
> medical treatment ...So, let me see... what happened
> next.. it was kind of a blur then, as I had to rest for 2
> weeks. (Selena Lamon)

For some online students, the University's material processes assert themselves in unexpected ways, creating a shadow arrival that reveals the imperfect mapping of distance students' needs onto established institutional practices. These processes are a part of the assemblage of what it means to be a student at Edinburgh, and cannot always accommodate distance *from* Edinburgh. Erik's arrival story, despite his living and planning to study entirely outside the UK, included an on-campus visit for a learning assessment to formalise support for his dyslexia:

> This involved travelling up to Edinburgh and a full ed
> psych report... So I guess in some respects my start point
> was in August when I visited the University for this
> purpose... (Erik Credle)

Darcy, as a member of staff at the University, found it necessary to arrive over and over again as she met tutors offline and online with her different 'hats' (staff and student) on:

> It made me feel like a fraud sometimes... I don't mean
> that bad but on occasion I would bump into the course
> tutors as I was wearing [m]y staff hat and not student
> hat (I did so last week again) and it is awkward as you
> want to chat to them as a student but somehow you are
> not in a [discussion board].... It is strange, I have had
> that quite a few times now and I am never quite sure.
> (Darcy Boateng)

For Darcy, geographical closeness to, and institutional links with, the programme's teachers created confusion. The programme is not designed for such encounters, and in such cases, material presence may hinder, or at least radically disrupt, nearness.

Different degrees of nearness are experienced by most students at different times, but some students never feel they fully arrive. Patrick experienced the whole programme at something of a remove: "I suppose I'm a fairly reluctant academic... necessity brought me to study the course ...it always comes after family and work commitments" (Patrick Hewitt). Perhaps for this reason, his affinity with Edinburgh, and the programme, was never strong:

> I just work on the course in the same way someone can
> read a book or do a crossword without feeling they are in
> anyway with the authors. I'm fully engaged in the course

> but I just don't feel I belong anywhere other than where I
> am. (Patrick Hewitt)

Though not a barrier to academic success on his courses, he did feel the lack of community engagement as a disadvantage, attributing this to factors including his pace, his willingness to commit time, and to the mediated nature of the programme:

> I never really felt that the community bit worked as well
> as I'd hoped... I never really got to know that well other
> students as it's just more hard work communicating via
> text and also taking the slow route meant that many
> would come and go and leave me in their wake. (Patrick
> Hewitt)

These passages indicate the complex and nuanced manifestations of arriving on a programme. For some, these arrivals were complicated by parallel engagements with institutional practices; for others, the process of arrival was interpreted as incomplete or repeatedly enacted. These arrivals influence the assemblage of nearness that students experience. There is no shared experience of arrival, and therefore no fixed processes of resilience-building that will suffice. Instead, such processes must take difference and change into account, and the concluding section of the paper suggests four ways this might be approached.

Returns

The things that keep students near or bring them back, their affinities with the programme, are as varied as their arrivals. For Lilia, someone who made relatively little use of the discussion elements of the programme and worked largely independently, the programme contributed to a creative transition in her life:

> On one of the courses I suddenly felt online gave me an
> opportunity to express myself, including creative
> expression,
>
> something I was really into as a teenager but something I
> gave up on when I became an adult.
>
> It was like rediscovering yourself... it was like a fish
> being put back into water if you know what I mean. (Lilia
> Banton)

Lilia's affinity with the programme was strong, but personal, and as a result perhaps not always visible to tutors or fellow students. And affinity or nearness can create other kinds of unseen effects. Max, whose time on the programme led him to further, doctoral-level study, described the programme, and particularly the facilities he gained access to, as spurring a significant transition:

> I had always had the idea of further postgrad study in the back of my mind,
>
> but the MSc really brought that to the fore,
>
> and gave me access to the facilities that allowed me to pursue this.
>
> so at the end of the MSc, I feel quite different from when I started. (Max Crary)

Personal engagements appear to form a strong foundation for affinity and resilience, and these may become visible through the required participation elements of courses: through assessment. The MSc in Digital Education engages students in self-selecting topics and self-nominating extra assessment criteria, as well as in opportunities to represent knowledge in creative and multimodal ways, and the quality of many of the assignments students produce is exceptional. Teachers might look to assignments not only as evidence of achievement of learning outcomes, but as opportunities to see something of how nearness is being assembled for students at a particular moment in time.

Other affinities relate to the circumstances of participation, and the extent to which the programme offers support for, or sometimes freedom from, challenges students are facing. Eve's chronic health condition contributed to her decision to study in an online distance mode, and her success in her courses and ability to undertake her study felt like "escape":

> Interviewer: How does the university 'feel' to you online?
>
> Eve Maltby: Maybe as a sense of space, freedom, opportunity, as it is defined in opposition to the rest of my life
>
> ...I wonder if it is almost somewhere to escape to - actually yes, that makes sense. For the short time each day when I am engaged with the course, I no longer notice the const[r]aints that dominate the rest of the time.

Matthew's affinities were largely to other participants:

> Interviewer: You've talked about friendship and community this evening - will graduation represent a departure from the special group you've been part of?
>
> Matthew Gillon: No, I don't think so.

Affinities, as presented here, can refer to transformation, support, and social connections. These affinities, if recognised, can give students the support to be resilient in the face of unexpected disruptions to their study. Teachers might help students identify and connect with these affinities to build resilience.

Teachers and support staff can take important roles, also, by actively engaging with students at points of temporary departure. For Noreen, a need for a suspension of her studies was a point where she might have been treated by teachers, as she put it, like "just another number", but instead she felt supported, as if she was a "regular student", and this gave her the determination to return and succeed:

> They treated me from the beginning as a regular student. Like I said before this came across when I had to stop and suspend the course. It could have been so very different, they could have dismissed me as someone who they would never see and I was just another number … but it wasn't the case at all.
>
> Interviewer: They were understanding?
>
> Yes, made me feel completely relaxed and it was a very stressful time for me. it just wasn't a problem... It made me determined to do well and complete it no matter (Noreen Reddy)

For others, like Allie, life events can prove so disruptive that momentum is difficult to regain. Allie described a combination of a family bereavement, technical troubles, and work pressures as throwing her off course in ways she was having trouble recovering from:

> I was very engaged initially, but this episode threw me.... I also decided not to do a module last spring. But that was due to needing to reorganize my business because with the recession, my business has really dropped off. Unfortunately, I didn't have time to focus on my business because [a parent] passed away... I am now doing a module but am still split as I need to focus on my business. So I guess at the moment, I am finding it hard to engage although the spirit is very willing. (Allie Ruther)

Sometimes when this happens, because of the flexibility the programme offers, students take long breaks – up to a year and occasionally even longer between courses. Returning after such a break can be extremely challenging. As Noreen put it, the flexibility that

appears to come along with online distance learning can be something of an illusion, at least when it comes to pacing:

> One thing I loved about doing an online degree was that I could read the materials in my own time. I had the flexibility to work through the materials in my time. I had two young children at the time and working full time. However, going forward to now this course is different because of the technology we have at our disposal. It is more interactive which means its not just about reading something and then creating an essay at the end. (Noreen Reddy)

Indeed, because the programme is so contact-intensive, students describe even a few days' absence during courses as leaving them "panning for nuggets of insight in an increasingly voluminous river" (Erik Rumery).

In other respects, though, flexibility is a key aspect of students' crafting of resilient and creative stances to their programme participation. Variables of space and place, arrivals and departures, and the emotional and intellectual content circulated through them, reveal some of the complexity of the relationship between students and online programmes. These fluid relationships are assembled based on need, motivation, affinity, and circumstance, and these assemblages define nearness and distance in this context. Student resilience in navigating these relationships and this terrain is an expression of this complexity, and mechanisms to support this resilience are discussed in the concluding section.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that the relationships between online distance learners and their affiliated educational institutions are complex. It has organised this complexity within the context of a conceptual framework of nearness as temporary assemblage, where students engage and disengage with the institution at varying intervals and with varying degrees of affinity. It has shown that arrivals and departures are influenced by outside commitments, shifting priorities, technologies, and relationships with the programme, the institution, the academic community, and the subjects with which they engage.

These complex relationships, influenced as they are by assemblages of nearness, arrivals and departures, and presence and absence, ultimately influence the resilience of the students in navigating the formalized programme of study. Resilience is an attribute that teachers can consider designing for. As such, we close by proposing four strategies that teachers might consider helpful for supporting students' resilience to shifts in engagement with online distance programmes of study.

1. **Recognise nearness as effortful**. Nearness enacts a cost and requires an effort that may not always align with the expectations, motivations, and commitments of the student. Even when it does, it will not be an effort that can be maintained at the same level indefinitely. These misalignments and shifts of effort can be productive, if prospective and continuing students are helped with strategies for making the effort, and reassured that times of both nearness and greater distance are normal. This might prove to be a valuable part of pre-arrival and induction processes for online distance programmes, perhaps expressed through a series of narratives from other students about how they have navigated the formation of their own assemblages of nearness, coped with disruptions, and experienced periods of greater distance. New students might then prepare themselves for the effort involved not only in doing the work, but in making and sustaining connections and affinities, and recognise when this is and is not working well for them.

2. **Identify affinities.** As we have seen, affinities can be personal, social, and structural. They will also be found both inside and outside the formalized aspects of the programme, and students might seek to build on the commitments that bridge their professional, personal, and academic worlds. Assessment practices that give students opportunities to articulate their positions and meaning-making in the context of programme content might make affinities visible. These practices might have reflective elements, or be based on topics that students select. Teachers might also suggest strategies for identifying affinities – ways of noticing where areas of excitement or preoccupation might indicate productive areas to focus on.

3. **Value perspective shifts**. By viewing nearness as continually assembled, we open spaces for considering the value of the different perspectives that come at times of greater nearness and greater distance. One benefit of studying part-time is that there is more time for ideas to be cultivated, and for insights to emerge in unexpected ways. Where students are recording their developing ideas online (in discussion boards, blogs, wikis, and so on), traces of perspective are laid down and made visible. Teachers might use these traces in more deliberate ways, setting students occasional tasks of revisiting and examining an older perspective of their own, valuing the forgotten insight, the former preoccupation, a past configuration of knowledge that may spark new engagements.

4. **Design openings**. Where students are in periods of greater distance, perhaps even alienation, returning can be challenging (as we saw Allie describe). Creating "openings", or invitations, that normalise distance and acknowledge the challenges of reassembling nearness, might help students to find their way back "in". These invitations might be personal and direct (a friendly email), or more diffuse (a programme space that is easy to check in to, such as a Twitter feed or a social hub). What we should be seeking to do, as teachers on online

distance programmes, is to design opportunities for potential reconnection that students can build on when they need them. Such openings need not disappear after graduation either – they can continue to be part of the shifting relationships between programmes, teachers, and current and former students that an online distance programme makes particularly possible.

More work still needs to be done to make distance visible, and to design strategies for making use of this visible distance. It is not enough to design a programme for flexibility. We must also understand and work with students' experience of that flexibility – an experience which can be both fertile and troubling. This is not primarily about increasing retention, though greater retention rates might be an outcome of this understanding. Rather, this is about increasing the satisfaction and provocation that students and teachers can get from shifts of perspective that come with approaches and retreats, and in seeing the value in times of greater distance as well as greater closeness to their work on online distance programmes. It is about understanding the nature of student assemblages of presence and distance, how these are in constant negotiation. It is about increasing students' resilience in navigating the variations of distance and perspective encountered in a formalized programme of instruction.

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