‘Mere jelly’: the bodies of networked learners

Siân Bayne
University of Edinburgh
OK, so would you say that learning online liberates you or constrains you?

Um, [pause] instantly I would say it constrains me, and then you ask me why! [laughs]

Why? [laughs]

Because I can’t use my body! You know I can’t use my you know, body language, I can’t use my hands or I can’t like say things twice. I just you know it’s just it’s just the language I’m using, like language you know a language! D’y you know what I mean?

Paulina
Well people can’t see you, so it doesn’t matter what you look like, whereas you know people don’t judge you as much on what you look like, or what you’re dressed like, or whatever, they just listen to what you say and not make so many judgements on other factors. So I think it does, people listen to you more. ‘Cos you see it within groups, the more good-looking people tend to have more attention like from everyone, everyone just talks to them more, whereas online you’re all the same, so people will listen to everything you say rather than like listening and um always looking at someone else.

Megan
phenomenological
• 'reunion' of mind
and body
• visible body
online losses
posthuman
• 're-articulation' of the
body
• masked body
online gains
Today’s talk

• the mind-body split online
• theorising the two strands
  – challenging dualism
  – the refigured body in cyberspace
• more student accounts
• two ways of teaching
The mind-body split online

• Plato, Descartes, Moravec:

[my] essence [is defined by] the *pattern* and the *process* going on in my head and body, not the machinery supporting that process. If the process is preserved, I am preserved. The rest is mere jelly.

Moravec 1988: 117
• **dualism in education:**
  
  the mind-body separation [is] the most culturally deeply embedded dualism with which educational theory and practice must come to terms.

  Peters 2002: 404

• **learner ecstasis:**

  every learner can, at his or her own choice of time and place, access a world of multimedia material… immediately the learner is unlocked from the shackles of fixed and rigid schedules, from physical limitations…and is released into an information world which reacts to his or her own pace of learning.

  Benjamin 1994: 49
Theorising the two strands

Challenging dualism

• the ‘thinking body’

Indeed, far from the mind being something distinct from the body located in space and time, as Descartes thought, the mind can be reconceptualised as an emergent effect of a body active within the social, historical and biological dimensions of space and time.

Burkitt 1999: 15

• Bourdieu and *habitus*
The rearticulated body
Haraway’s cyborg, Hayles’ posthuman

The machine is not an it to be animated, worshipped, and dominated. The machine is us, our processes, an aspect of our embodiment.

Haraway 1991: 180

the posthuman subject is an amalgam, a collection of heterogeneous components, a material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction.

Hayles 1999: 3
More student accounts

- the teacher’s body
- cyborg students
The teacher’s body

I just think it’s so much better to have like face to face interaction than have a sort of writing down thing, ‘cos you don’t know who you’re talking to you know, if you never meet your tutor, you won’t know what they look like, y’know, I think these things are important, especially ‘cos when you come to university, when you start here you always look to your tutors and stuff and you like look at them, you’re not judging them, but you’re sort of looking at them for like how to act and how, you sort of try and pick up things that they do...

you’re always looking at the person above you and thinking ‘How would I do that?’. You always have higher goals in yourself and you always want to be like that person. And you don’t, I don’t think you get that.

Marina
Can you identify why you’d prefer to learn face to face?

Well I think it’s the learning environment and being together with other people and and seeing the expression on their faces and going for coffee in between and talk about the tutor and how he always picks his nose or whatever things like that. I mean this is what makes learning fun, in a group.

So how real does your tutor feel online to you?

Well I think he’s always the tutor and not really a personality or a human being. It just it’s not very real, he only comments on the work, but I don’t really know him as a personality.

Cornelia
Cyborg students

Overall d’you think you’d prefer to learn online or face to face?

Probably online, because of the confidence thing. It’s not so bad to ask embarrassing questions, because if you ask a stupid question you feel stupid and you get embarrassed, you don’t wait for an answer you just leave whereas if it’s online it’s just like it’s only words they don’t seem real it’s not you so it’s not too bad.

Megan

[Online] you just type it in anyway, and press the button, ‘cos it’s not like you’re actually saying it at all, so it’s not you, it’s like you’re just a name, people won’t attach it to, like, who you are.

Charlie
I suppose there’s something about, if you think you’re funny or whatever and I do think I am sometimes, again because of the whole freedom thing you can make jokes or be clever online and there’s no danger of somebody, OK they could criticise you online, but because it’s not, it’s almost like it’s not real, they’re not seeing you, the only judgement they can make on you is what you’ve written, they can’t make any other judgement on you, your appearance or anything like that, so it’s almost like it’s safer, you can change your whole personality.

Sarah
Two ways of teaching

McWilliam, Dreyfus and the teacher incarnate

Monroe and the refigured student body
McWilliam, Dreyfus and the teacher incarnate

the teacher’s body can come to stand for a body of knowledge and engagement with this body can at times have positive outcomes for learners.

McWilliam and Taylor 1997: 15

only emotional, involved, embodied human beings can become proficient and expert and only they can become masters. So, while they are teaching specific skills, teachers must also be incarnating and encouraging involvement.

Dreyfus 2001: 48
Monroe and the refigured student body

The multiple illusions of privacy, equalitarianism, and homogeneity afforded by the electronic medium helps us idealize not just new bodies, but also new selves to inhabit them…online, students developed a sense of themselves as acting, speaking subjects [yet] the more intimate we became online, the more distant we became offline.

Monroe 1999: 69
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