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The digital university: translocal, transtemporal (0108)

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores the concept of *translocality*, a term borrowed from recent literature in cultural geography, defined by Brickell and Datta (2011) as 'simultaneous situatedness across different locales' (p4), and applies it to the notion of 'distance' education in the digital university. Drawing on research which takes a narrative approach to the study of emerging practice in the digital expansion of a UK university, the paper works with the concept of the *translocal* to develop an equivalent understanding of the *transtemporal* in higher education, where multiple timeframes, as well as locales, are engaged in the work of the university. Rather than turning 'distance' students towards the dominant spatial and temporal geography of the campus, from which those students are 'removed', the paper calls for greater attention to be paid to the complex translocal and transtemporal relationships which form the contemporary digital university.

(142 words)

### **Outline**

This paper proposes that *translocality*, a concept developed in cultural geography to think about the effects of migration leading to a 'simultaneous situatedness across different locales' (p4), can be used generatively as a way of thinking about the contemporary digital university. As online 'distance' education often involves participants in a variety of locations, communicating in digital environments, many locales may be engaged across the duration of a course. Whilst this does not mean that those participating in digital education have the experience (necessarily) of migration, or literally moving between geographically distant places, it does mean that multiple locales form a complex 'location' for the digital university. It is 'simultaneously situated', but also moving around. As Bayne *et al* (under submission) suggest, digital education is '...a mode in which institutional formation and personal identity, location and diaspora, mobility and stasis are continually and creatively re-thought, re-formed and re-shaped'. This paper proposes *translocality* as one way of thinking about such processes of organizational metamorphosis.

As Oakes and Schein (2006) define the term,

...translocality does not only mean people. It is crucially constituted as well by the circulation of capital, ideas and images, goods and styles, services, diseases...Translocality is also fashioned out of the rise of instantaneous modes of communication...and out of the profusion of media forms...that transmit images of other places. (p1)

Significantly for the purposes of this paper, Oakes and Schein (2006) stress the multimodal 'travel' of the local, allowing for translocality which may, or may not, involve the physical movement of people, objects and ideas. The

authors suggest that there is a 'subjective dimension' to translocality, which includes 'vicarious mobilities and translocal imaginaries' (p1). For Oakes and Schein, this means that the translocal is a way of thinking about mobility alongside 'many other forms and functions of connectedness, both past and present' (p1). They see the translocal as nuanced term, which goes further than 'transnational' or 'global', 'to highlight a simultaneous analytical focus on mobilities *and* localities', where consideration can be given to 'the multiplying forms of mobility...without losing sight of the importance of localities in people's lives'. (p1, italics in original)

Building on these ideas of the translocal, the presentation of this paper will draw on data from a current research project (outlined below), which takes an analytic interest in notions of time, in order to surface the temporality of digital 'distance' education. The term *transtemporal* is introduced here to emphasize the coexistence of different 'times' when considering translocality. These times include, not only the practical time differences in making translocal connections, but also the experiential times of individual accounts, as well as the multiple political and cultural times (the 'times we live in'), which might be significant to the practices of digital education.

Rye and Stokken (2012), in a discussion of 'online global education', suggest that '...international collaborative programmes will in some ways always have to confront a variety of social, political, and economic realities. Similarly, the students, in their daily lives, must negotiate with social and material connections to distant places' (p194). The authors go on to explore the idea that 'global online education largely reflects the localities where students and educators live', concluding that '...rather than creating a new space of equality, the differences between local contexts and the inequalities between participants, are exposed in such an online environment...' (p203).

Here Rye and Stokken make an important point about the digital environment as one that might highlight inequality, and this would be one effect of the translocal juxtaposition of locales. However, it seems important to make the additional argument here that, although 'inequalities between participants' may often be significant in an online context, it is the way in which the digital often *does not* expose inequality, where inequality may become invisible and therefore be overlooked, which might be considered problematic.

The particular value proposed in this paper then, of considering the translocal and the transtemporal in relation to digital education, is to call for, and to surface:

1) The translocal and the transtemporal as ways of thinking about *where* and *when* digital education is located. This becomes more complex than 'anytime, anywhere' learning and teaching. The concepts encourage thinking about the complexity of the practices and processes of digital education.

2) The translocal and the transtemporal as ways of thinking about the experiences of individuals, across a range of places and times which might be associated with 'home', 'work', and 'study' (for both students and staff), to those places and times which might be associated with the 'host' institution, or the 'home' nation. The translocal/transtemporal may make such distinctions less distinct in digital education, whilst also surfacing those places and times which might be described as being 'in between'.

3) The translocal and the transtemporal as ways of thinking about equality, including the promotion of an equality of value between what might be described as the

campus-centric university, and the multiple locales (bodies and objects, times and spaces) in which it can be seen to co-exist.

### **Research Project**

The research referred to in the full presentation of this paper focuses on a study of an online distance education expansion project in a UK university. The research takes a narrative approach (Czarniawska 2004) to conducting interviews (30 completed) with a variety of university staff and students engaged with new postgraduate taught online 'distance' courses. Using a 'three dimensional' narrative framework (adapted from Clandinin and Connelly 2000), interviews are analyzed, alongside university, higher education policy, and 'think-tank' documents, to explore the time-spaces of a variety of narratives of the university and of digital higher education. Particular attention is paid to the temporal aspects of these narratives, in order to surface temporality over what are considered to be the spatial preoccupations of 'distance' education.

(956 words)

### **References**

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