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A MATTER OF DISTANCE – STEPPING INTO THE "DANCE" OF PRACTICE THROUGH EPORTFOLIOS

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Introduction

The overarching project under consideration in this paper is that of supporting international students' transition into university culture in Australia through the development of knowledge, skills and dispositions. In this context the concept of distance shifts from distance learning to *distance load* where students face many levels of distance in their transition to university. This paper suggests that a reconceptualisation of ePortfolios through practice theory may prove useful in addressing distance load. An ePortfolio reconceptualised as rehearsal and performance space, a supportive environment where students can metaphorically step in and out *of the dance* of learning, offers a conceptual frame for a personal journey, an apprenticeship into new ways of knowing, doing, and being, and an acculturation into practices and learning communities. It is proposed that by engaging with curriculum through an ePortfolio, informed by social practice theory, students not only develop skills and knowledge, but also more evolved dispositions that begin to embody technology as a valued and integral part of learning in a way that can be carried forward into their social and civic life. In conceiving of educational practice through the lens of practice theory, it is posited that the skills and knowledge (required) to actively engage in a society (characterized by digital technology) are learned and embodied through practices

Context

UTS:Insearch Sydney is a provider of quality pathway education programs that prepare and support students to enter into and thrive in the Australian university environment. Students participating in the UTS:Insearch Foundation Studies Program are international students who are in transition from an overseas school system to an Australian university system. These students stem from a range of sociocultural backgrounds and come with a diversity of skills, language competency and digital literacies, including English as a second language. With them they carry an array of social and cultural practices, including education, with varied exposure to technologies, some never having used a computer. As a result the student cohort presents varied learning needs that call for inclusive teaching practices and technologies. Beyond the obvious need of language acquisition, these students require support to transition from predominately teacher centred learning (silent observer and individual study) to independent learning (self regulated active participation and collaboration) through the development of both academic and soft skills. These students are preparing to enter into

academic dialogue, and a *university culture*, one that values critical engagement, analytics, creativity, innovation and technology; a culture that international students require an acculturation into. The need for acculturation draws out attention to social practices and highlights concepts of distance for students transitioning to university.

Concepts of distance

Distance education has traditionally been defined by considerations of learning across geographic distance and or asynchronous distance mediated through technology enabled learning (Gunawardena & McIsaac, 2005; Peters, 2001). Distance presents a powerful geographic divide in Australia however advances in communication technologies and travel have lessoned the perceptions of distance both locally and globally. Distance education in Australia grew out of the extensive radio network established to support the Royal Flying Doctor Service to communicate with remote communities across vast distances. The School of the Air was established in 1950 and was one of the earliest forms of distance education for remote communities in Australia. In 2005 there were more than sixteen schools of the air covering more than 1.5 million square kilometres (Australian Government, 2016). Across educational fields technology has become mainstream collapsing notions of time and distance and rendering many technological approaches to learning, previously the remit of distance education, as everyday. As technologies have become more ubiquitous, they have been adopted in many educational settings (Gunawardena & McIsaac, 2005), to support the anytime anyplace conception of learning and the peripatetic learner (Sherringham & Stewart, 2010). However distance education involves broader forms of distance learning; those that relate to *learning distance*.

Distance in the context of learning can be considered through many frames. At a social level distance can be considered as a process of induction within which participants gradually move from peripheral observation to more central participation in communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). On a developmental level there are varying degrees of distance for the learner in terms of where they are in their learning and where they need to be; these degrees exist across activities, at different moments in a learner's development and also through variance between the individuals in a student cohort (Vygotsky, 1978). At an interaction level distance can be considered in terms of pedagogic distance (Peters, 2001). Pedagogic distance refers to the distance between the teacher and the student and can be characterized by the intensity of interaction between the roles of teacher and student (Oliver & Trigwell, 2005). For example, low intensity interactions may be representative of more self-guided learning and reflection whereas high intensity interactions may be more dialogic and scaffolded.

In addition, students bring to each learning opportunity a store of prior learning practices, from both formal education and informal life experiences, that all carry dispositions, attitudes values and ways of knowing, doing and being. These include experiences of and dispositions toward learning, including the tools and technologies associated with this learning. Therefore, there is a need to recognise and considered not only social, developmental, and pedagogic distance but also past learning practices including their tools and technologies. These

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background differences create distance between past and desired learning experiences and also between the learners and their peers.

International students, particularly in Pathway Education, face *distance load*, that is to say, the learning distance for them is greater. They are not only experiencing the transition from secondary to tertiary education they are also dislocated physically from their family and friends, they are isolated through language, they are in a foreign cultural setting, and in an unfamiliar learning landscape. They are transitioning from embodied sociocultural practices with their inculcated dispositions to "other" ways of knowing, doing, and being where what is valued as exemplary performance, what is taken up as tools and technologies of practice, may vary greatly from their existing terms of reference and their existing learning practices.

Concepts of Practice

Within social practice theory, practices are seen as distinct and recognizable entities consisting of coordinated arrays of activity and performances that involve embodied ways of knowing and doing; with their supportive tools, background knowledge or competence, dispositions, tacit "rules" and norms, and motivational states (Bourdieu, 1984; Schatzki, 1996; Reckwitz, 2002; Rouse, 2007). Practices bring structure and meaning to activity through tasks, projects, desired ends and motivations (Shatzki, 1996; Reckwitz, 2002). According to Schatzki (1996; p.89) practices can be broadly grouped into two categories. Firstly *integrative* practices, being those that constitute particular domains in social life such as farming, in professional life such as designing, and in socially instituted practices such as the practice of education. Secondly there are *dispersed* practices, such as reading, questioning, examining, explaining or writing. In each type of practice, bodies and understandings are disciplined in different ways and attuned to different subtleties (Sherringham & Stewart, 2010).

As newcomers enter into a practice they do not yet embody the dispositions that value particular kinds of striving, nor do they yet recognize the subtleties of expert performance or the pleasures of accomplishment and intrinsic motivation associated with that practice (Sherringham & Stewart, 2010). Over time, through the process of learning, newcomers are opened up to feeling and performing in new ways as they are inducted into the practice. They come to understand what is valued and strived for, to new ways of knowing and doing that are gradually embodied to form background understandings. These dispositions are structuring and intrinsic to the performances of the particular practice and in the development of pleasures and motivations derived from that practice. It is this meaning and pleasure that practices bring to human activity and agency that positions them as the site of learning, and as such positions learning as a process that is constituted in and of practices. Practice theory, however, is under represented in the theorizing of learning and education design (Sherringham & Stewart, 2010; Hager et al.,2012). A conception of learning as constituted in and of practices draws our attention to the dispositions, embodied ways of knowing and doing, including tools and technology, which learners carry with them and enables a discernment of the "distance" in learning that students need to traverse. It also draws our attention to the types of transitions students are negotiating in the process of acculturation

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into new practices and practice communities when dispositions and "ways" may need to shift (Warde, 2004).

In referring to *practices* the project draws upon "a body of theory that builds on 20th century phenomenological, hermeneutic, anthropological and sociological arguments. This emergent theoretical direction, which references influences from (late) Wittgenstein and Heidegger, gained impetus in the wake of Bourdieu's Outline of a Theory of Practice (1972), Giddens's Central Problems in Social Theory (1979) and MacIntyre's After Virtue (1981), and has been further mobilised since the turn of the century in the texts of Theodor Schatzki (2001), and Andreas Reckwitz (2002)" (Sherringham & Stewart, 2010).

As we learn, each new learning experience introduces us to or deepens our experience of and participation in practices. When we learn to speak we learn through the practices of accomplished speakers, who model an orchestrated practice of spoken, bodily communication. These accomplished speakers break down language to sounds, words and gestures and there associated meanings, slowly building vocabulary, phrase formation, sentence structure and expression as our language practice becomes more accomplished. As we are introduced to the practices of reading and writing this accomplishment becomes more developed. As we enter different language practices we need to negotiate new ways. For students overtime the practices of speaking, reading and writing become enmeshed in the practice of communication. A student moving into higher levels of education will need to refine the practice of communication, developing and integrating new dispersed practices such as argumentation, expression and creativity. Entering into University a student will need to develop the knowledge and skills associated with academic writing which, depending on which domain of professional life one is getting an education in, will have its own type of voice, ways of knowing doing and relating. These dispersed practices, when formalized in social institutions, all form part of the project of "getting and education" within the practice of education and as part of this project learners embody ways of knowing, doing and relating that they will take into their "civic life" (Kemmis et al., 2012).

This process of "getting an education" when likened to an apprenticeship, whether explicit or not, offers a way into practices that provides learners with a conceptual model of ways of knowing and doing, highlighting what is valued, and what constitutes desired performances. Through the framing of learning as an apprenticeship students are engaged in a scaffolded induction into practices within which they are able to recognize learning as a process, and indeed to self monitor their own learning (Collins et al., 1991). In an apprenticeship, the learner is generally made aware of the end result or product they are aspiring to. They are first guided through the simpler activities and concepts, building to the more complex. They are provided with modelled behaviours and exemplar performances. Their performances are scaffolded, observed, evaluated, corrected they are encouraged through feedback and also challenged to improve. This process structures ways of knowing, doing, relating and valuing within the particular practice being learned (Collins et al., 1991). This form of structured learning supports a student's development whilst also enabling them to develop self-monitoring strategies. They come to measure how well they are integrating the skills and

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knowledge associated with the practices being learnt, building a conceptual model of expert performances (Lave, 1991). This model acts as an "advanced organizer for students initial attempts" and an "interpretive structure for making sense of feedback" supporting the move toward increasingly independent learning and practice (Collins et al., 1991). In addition this learning takes place in a sociocultural context where group members are striving for similar goals, ways of knowing, doing, relating and valuing. Learners can observe peers *in practice* helping them to recognize differing levels of performance. This immersion in a sociocltural context builds an appreciation of the shared pleasures and motivations that are associated with improved performance providing the potential to develop community.

The pleasure and motivation derived from performance in practices alerts us to the engagement and dedication practices can bring forth. In the context of education Kemmis et al. (2012) uses the analogy of practice as a *type of dance* that you can step into and out of. Through our learning experiences and throughout life we are entering into a world of coalescing practices, that can be stepped into or out of in different ways, as we try new things, develop skills and knowledge in new areas. For example each dance represents a set of background understandings, some specific to the dance form, other specific the genre of dance and others universally held by all who dance. The ability to step out of one dance and into another developing and carrying dispositions from one to the next, and recognising the various dance forms, and their origins, as interconnected and interacting with teachers as co-participants in the dance. Using the metaphor of dance conjures up images of social exchanges, interactions, self-expression, engagement, colourful mixings of mind and body, rehearsals, timely and disciplined feedback, attuning to expert performance through effort and precision.

Providing students with a rehearsal space and a stage for learning enables a metaphorical bounding of the "dance". This bounding identifies a safe space within which students can focus their efforts, where they can rehearse, perform and choreograph their learning with support and guidance. Like the dance studio with its mirrors, learning environments require opportunities to *see*, *model* and reflect on ones performance and to see, model and reflect on the performance of others. These environments offer equipmental and technological support, like the bar, and the sprung floors, to steady and protect, the sound system to fill the room with music. Exemplars to guide the dancer such as choreography to give structure and the teacher to demonstrate, provide guidance for refinement, and emotional connection to the performance until the performer and performance are ready for the stage. Resources, like backdrops and props providing rich tapestries and signifiers of contextual meaning. Adding the analogy or metaphor of "dance" brings further richness to conceptions of learning and how it may be supported. It draws attention to role the learning environment plays in supporting this process of induction, attunement, and the cultivation of a disposition for ways of knowing and doing "the dance".

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Stepping into the dance

Drawing on the above concepts a framework for a learning environment begins to emerge. Firstly, conceptions of distance highlight the need for a socially conceived learning environment that addresses variance in levels of development, engages students through appropriate and varied degrees of interaction and scaffolds and supports students to reduce the distance load. Practice theory highlights learning as constituted in *practices* and draws attention to the acculturation into practices and how this process, akin to apprenticeship, highlights what is valued within practices including knowledge, skills, tools and technologies. Further practice theory provides useful metaphoric frames for conceiving of a sociocultural site for learning and performance, as a rehearsal space where practice is as a dance that can be stepped in to and out of and where learning is 'choreographed' and accompanied by an "orchestrated arrangement" (Kemmis et al., 2012).

In the context of Insearch, learning environments need to be considered in concert with the Insearch Model of Learning. This model responds to student needs through a series of approaches to learning and teaching with one of the key approaches being that of student-centred technology-enabled learning where technologies, including software, are taken up to enhance and or extend student learning. The model therefore suggests the consideration of a digital learning environment. A digital learning environment offers the potential to address distance, variation in the student cohort, provide a supportive space for students to go to rehearse and develop their learning practice, whilst also offering a vehicle for students to develop the skills and knowledge to actively engage in digital technology.

ePortfolios as a way to step into the "dance"

A review of the literature on ePortfolios reveals emerging and powerful evidence, from theorists, educators and learners, on their transformational potential to promote learning, and support learners transition (Love et al., 2004; Jafari & Kaufman, 2005; Yancey, 2009; Ballantyne, 2012). Further they have been shown to address learning across various fields / domains and literacies including language acquisition (Watson & Doolittle, 2011). When well designed and intentionally integrated into the curriculum through education design, ePortfolios improve students grasp and comprehension and can transform their worldview (Watson & Doolittle, 2011, Gunn & Steel, 2012). What the review also revealed was that the conceptualisation of an ePortfolio through social practice theory and the consideration of *distance load* are stepping into unchartered waters. Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC), EDUCAUSE, the International Journal of ePortfolio, and conference proceedings such as EDEN, amongst others all provide extensive coverage of the topic.

On the surface the ePortfolios will not look that different to other ePortfolios; they will have a similar architecture, they will incorporate public areas containing background, social and aspirational information and private areas where students will incorporate work and receive feedback, there will be exemplar sites developed for student reference. Like other ePortfolios the aim is to bring together the curriculum as a global model and to provide tangible links between the elements thereby acting as a form of conceptual map of where students are and

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where they are heading acting as a target and guide for rehearsal and performance of students (Collins et al., 1991). Unlike most ePortfolios the work will be seen as formative with a focus on improvement not on assessment. The intention of the ePortflio is to provide a site for both rehearsal and performance (a construction zone Jafari & Kaufman, 2006) that is integral to the curriculum.

The ePortfolio as a living learning environment enables students of diverse skill levels and from diverse backgrounds to identify and connect with their learning and development through examples of their work over time, demonstrating knowledge and skills as they are developing. Whilst not assessed, the work developed is linked to assessment criteria, the students' self assessment, reflection, and feedback from faculty and peers. Live feedback sessions with teachers, integral to the curriculum, support the development of both the students' learning, their work, and their ePortfolios through the development of digital literacies. Peer support is facilitated through technology and peer review workshops (which adopt reciprocal teaching strategies) where students work together to assist each other by way of technical know how, dialogue, and feedback to refine their understandings and skills. Also and importantly guest spots enable feedback from family and friends at a distance.

The ePortfolio as a technology for the extension of educational practice, acts as an enabling learning environment and *practice tool* supporting the development of shared knowledge, skills, dispositions, motivations and pleasures through shared experiences and aspirations encouraging communities of practice to form (Lave, 1991). The ePortfolio as a learning environment broadens opportunities for learning in and out of the classroom that enhance interactions between teachers and students, students and peers, students and the curriculum, students and technology, students and self. Such engagements promote the experience of variety and choice leading to learner discernment or the application of new knowledge and skills in both reflective and relational ways developing students' personal knowledge frameworks (Oliver & Trigwell, 2005). Through these mediated interactions students are acculturated into academic learning practices, and through the positioning of the ePortfolio as a *practice tool* inherent to learning, students come to value digital technology as an integral part of the *project* of getting an education in contemporary society.

This type of learning environment provides both a structured and heuristic *apprenticeship* model within which students develop their knowledge and skills. Framing the environment as a rehearsal and performance space provides powerful metaphors for the students to grasp. These metaphors, it is argued, will enable students to see the learning environment as a dynamic space where the focus is on the *dance* of learning, which they can *step in to* and *out of* finessing their knowledge and skills both with the guidance of others and independently. Conceiving of the environment as a space where students can rehearse, refine, and improve their performances motivates students to re-examine their performances and provides impetus for learning as the students learning becomes more visible and their sense of identity as a learner and a member of a learning community evolves.

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First steps

As a first phase for the introduction of the ePortfolio the concept of *distance load* and the frame of a social rehearsal space from practice theory have been tested in the "crucible of practice" (Gunn & Steel, 2012) using action research to capture the specifics of practice and to test theory in practice. A pilot project was run in the subject Multimedia over a two semester period in 2016 involving 18 staff and 160 students across two separate cohorts of students. Students identified the ePortfolio as a personal space and a personal project that they (the student body) would be undertaking together. They welcomed the opportunity to reflect on their learning, through the portfolio and the portfolios of other students. They saw the ePortfolio as an extended opportunity to gain feedback from teachers and peers. They enjoyed the ePortfolio as an avenue for expression and to connect their learning with other aspects of their lives and to other students. They immediately recognised that it helped them to navigate the course, organise their work and to pull their ideas together. They took pride in their ePortfolios and felt they made their achievements more evident. Some found the original platform for the ePortfolio challenging although they enjoyed that it was dynamic, *alive*. The implementation of the ePortfolio to the whole of Program is more ambitious and will see its integration into every subject without exception. This implementation will involve further framing of the ePortfolio as a rehearsal space within which students can participate in the educational dance of learning to close the distance and improve performance.

Conclusion

Conceptions of distance in learning highlight the distance load faced by international students preparing for study in a university culture. Practice theory draws attention to acculturation into practices and the centrality of this process to learning. Through acculturation, dispositions can be shaped to new ways of knowing and doing and subsequently the values, pleasures and motivations attached to these become embodied. In preparing students for academic study, practice theory provides rich metaphors for the conception of an ePortfolio, as both a scaffolded and heuristic sociocultural site for rehearsal and as a performance space where students can step in to and out of the dance of learning. Through this sociocultural conception of an ePortfolio students are enabled to discover and learn something for themselves and about themselves whilst participating in a community of practice that will support students learning and the inculcation of habits of mind and body. These habits of body and mind are developed through the integrated use of the ePortfolio as a learning environment, and in so doing technology becomes an extension of and synonymous with learning and in turn, with social and civic life.

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