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E-discourse as an Index of Innovation in Traditional Tertiary Education

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Abstracts

This paper is an attempt to redress the balance between traditional learning and e-learning from e-discourse perspective. The need to do so is given impetus by rather strong statements made by some advocates of the latter that present these types of learning as adversaries, ignoring the fact a number of e-concepts are incorporated into the former as indices of educational innovation. All things considered, it was contended that very soon it would be surprising to realize that people still enroll in traditional tertiary institutions (Al-Awar, 2011) [1]. E-discourse is introduced in this paper to substantiate the view that traditional learning and e-learning are two facets of the same educational truth. Viz. e-discourse does, in fact, integrate these types of learning since it is richly employed by both "virtual academicians" and their world counterparts to communicate academic facts. A number of e-discourse-related arguments have been developed in support of this analysis.

Keywords: e-learning, traditional learning, e-discourse, e-metaphor, e-libraries, Wikipedia, blended learning.

1. Introduction

The huge proliferation of the Internet into the academia has given impetus to a new educational discourse that describes different activities undertaken therein. In other words, web-based learning, which is technically known as *e-learning*, has created its own *e-discourse* that manifests itself in a wealth of *e-metaphors*. In addition to being cognitive tools that convey new scientific perspectives on abstract concepts (Berger, 2011) [2], *e-metaphors* seem to dichotomize between traditional learning and *e-learning*. There are two pieces of evidence to support this conclusion. First, *e-learning* is said to have its *e-universities*, *e-libraries*, *e-classes*, etc. which, unlike their traditional counterparts, are wholly virtual. Second, in an attempt to publicize e-learning, some advocates have gone so far as to predict that very soon it would be surprising to realize that people still opt for traditional learning (Al-Awar, 2011) [3]. Implicit in such an extreme prediction is the suggestion that traditional learning has no e-content, ignoring the fact that traditional learning not only employs these resources but also establishes its own learning management systems where online classes are offered. Therefore, it is legitimate to argue that e-discourse and the concepts underlying it can function as a bridging mechanism between e-learning and traditional learning contrary to the generally held belief that they are mutually exclusive.

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Given this integrating nature of e-discourse, it would be convenient to explore the relevant literature to provide answers for the following questions:

i.   What is academic discourse and how does it manifest itself in e-contexts?
ii. What are the e-transactions that generate e-discourse in traditional education, and thus render it innovative?

2. Academic Discourse

Generally speaking, the term *academic discourse* (AD) refers to the language variety used in the academia. The most productive avenues of such a variety are "textbooks, conference presentations, lectures, and research articles" (Wikipedia) [4], which socialize newcomers into the appropriate discourse communities so that they can learn "to think, act, speak and write like a scientist in a scientific community of practice" (Duff, 2007; p. 3) [5]. A variety of terms are used in the literature to describe this socialization process, including *"academic discourse socialization"*, *"development of academic literacies"* and *language socialization"* (Rogoff, 1991; as quoted in Duff, 2007, p. 3) [6].

AD is associated with a number of roles in the academia. First, it is the only channel through which academic personnel are qualified to fully function as members of a given discourse community by adhering to the "rigid conventions for language use, in the choice of words, genre and style" (White and Lowenthal, 2011, p. 7) [7]. By contrast, "ignorance to and resistance to academic discourse" result in depriving beginning academicians from academic success (ibid). Second, AD is argued to embody the worldview perceived by the members of the specific academic community (Bizzel, 1999, p. 2) [8].

AD is assumed to be metaphorical in nature since it converts abstract concepts into concrete scientific perspectives (Berger, 2011, p. 39) [9]. Thus, the acquisition of appropriate metaphorical competence is central to the affiliation of beginning academicians with the relevant academic community. Historically, metaphor was considered "an ornamental use of language, a major rhetorical device used to enhance or embellish the literal meaning of something" (Turner, 1993, p. 49) [10]. However, with the advancement of scientific enquiry, it has become an important enculturation tool that facilitates the comprehension of the concepts underlying a given disciplinary track (Jensen, 2006; Zhao, 2009; MacArthur and Caballero, 2011; Nawaz and Khan, 2012) [11, 12, 13, 14].

The advent of the Internet has resulted in a new discourse reflecting a myriad of activities taking place online. This new discourse, known technically as *e-discourse*, is defined as a means of communication in the cyberspace (Munianday, 2002, p. 46) [15]. Like its traditional counterpart, *e-discourse* can be spoken and written (both synchronously and asynchronously). Also, it abounds in a host of metaphors that inform of a world that is wholly virtual. For instance, in *e-universities*, teaching and learning take place in *e-classes* where the main source of information can be *e-libraries*, *wikipedias*, *wiktionaries*, etc. All these activities follow from educational principles known technically as *webogogy* or *techno-pedagogy*.

In principle, the incorporation of technology into education is assumed to accommodate all types of learners (i.e. visual, oral, aural, read-write, etc.) and to bring more innovation into the classroom, among others. Therefore, the student's role in the e-environment has fueled *e-discourse* with a number of academic *e-metaphors*. Prensky (2001) [16] is the most cited authority in this respect. He terms the people who were born after 1983 *"digital natives"* since they speak a *"digital language"* of computers, videogames, and the Internet. Because those who were born before this same year can adapt to such a *"digital environment"*, Prensky describes them as *"digital immigrants"*, viz. they have met digital technology later in life and have adopted it. This generational divide did not appeal to other researchers since it does not allow for human initiative such that if one is not a native, s/he cannot acquire this a status. As result, Tall, 2009; as quoted in Cantoni (2011) [17] proposed a new perspective where a *"digital visitor"* can become a (digital) *"resident"* in a *"digital environment"*

3. E-discourse in Traditional Tertiary Institutions

It is reported in (1) above that an argument has been developed to persuade people that traditional learning is irrelevant to a world characterized by educational technology. The argument is one that views traditional learning and e-learning as adversaries that cannot co-exist in the same educational environment. A corollary of this argument is that not even Hegelian dialectic could resolve these types of learning into a coherent synthesis. This argument can be refuted on a number of   grounds with an ultimate aim of showing that e-learning and traditional learning are, in fact, two facets of the same educational truth.

To begin with, such terms as "e-library", "wikipedia", "wiktionary", etc. might tempt people to assume that they are restricted to the "virtual world" where e-learning takes place. In other words, since the referents of these terms are virtual in nature, they can only be accessed to academicians who perform academic transactions virtually. However, there is nothing inherent in these *e-sources* that makes them inaccessible to academic personnel in traditional tertiary institutions. In fact, they are part and parcel of everyday academic jargon of "traditional academicians", so to speak. Needless to say, they are not (linguistically) used for academic luxury; rather they are richly employed as teaching and research sources.

Second, the terms just discussed are subsumed under a more general e-metaphor known technically as "website". Once again, it is a most recurrent term in the discourse of traditional academic communities. The significance of this e-metaphor emanates from the central role its referent plays in academic and administrative communication. All tertiary institutions worldwide build professional websites to inform of their academic activities taking place both online and offline. Moreover, they are annually ranked on the basis of their *e-content* accessed from their websites. Thus, contrary to the view dichotomizing between traditional learning and e-learning, e-metaphors function as integrating mechanism between them.

Third, a most conciliatory e-metaphor to bridge traditional learning and e-learning is *"blended learning"* (BL). It is a concept that socializes academicians in traditional tertiary institutions into a business that is purely virtual. Viz. It empowers them to integrate e-learning into their regular, traditional classes so that a variety of problems are overcome. For instance, in Saudi Arabia BL functions as an effective avenue of communication between male professors and female students since the educational system does not allow the physical presence of both in the same facility at the same time (cf. Alebaikan, 2011) [18]. It is apparent, therefore, that BL is a powerful academic tool that traditional tertiary institutions can take refuge into as an index of educational innovation to facilitate teaching and learning.

Last but not least, it might concluded that the formation of the e-metaphor *"digital natives"* along with its underlying concept could serve as the clearest symptom of the obscurity and irrelevance of traditional learning to the educational needs of this generation of learners, and, thus, dichotomize these types of learning. This conclusion can further be motivated by Prensky's (2001) [19] proposal that the tendency of traditional academicians to speak a *"pre-digital language"* causes a lot of educational problems for *"digital natives"*. However, this reasoning seems to draw on the false assumption that traditional academicians are *ICT-illiterate*, ignoring the possibility that they can "reside" in the *digital world*. Moreover, most of the learners referred to as "digital natives" are enrolled in traditional tertiary institutions. This confirms the fact that there no rigid dividing line to separate traditional learning and e-learning.

4. Conclusion

This paper has been written against the backdrop of the proposition that traditional learning and e-learning are strange bedfellows contrary to the tremendous attempts made by traditional tertiary institutions to integrate e-learning into their academic systems. The paper has mainly drawn on linguistic evidence to refute this proposition. In other words, the proliferation of the Internet in the traditional academia has produced a huge academic discourse that not only socializes traditional academicians into the virtual academic community but also reflects their involvement in the educational activities therein. In the light of the e-discourse evidence, this paper strongly argues that traditional learning is as cognizant as their e-learning in conducting e-classes. Thus, by adding

innovation to the existing humanistic educational principles, traditional learning can further be argued to outperform its e-counterpart in making educational objectives more achievable.

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