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Jennifer H. Kelland
University of Alberta

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Theorizing the Body: Developing a Framework for Understanding the Body in Online Learning Environments

Jennifer H. Kelland
University of Alberta

Keywords: Online learning, body, identity, relationships, inclusivity

Abstract: This paper examines how five elements of the body (physical, personal, political, knowledgeable and expressive) have been understood in face-to-face learning contexts and how they could be examined in online learning contexts to create inclusive learning environments.

Purpose of this Study

Ultimately, the definition of the body must be fluid because it involves the interaction of multiple characteristics, hierarchies, identities, and relations. While the body is the physical or material part of an individual, it represents much more than just the bones and muscles; it can be considered as a series of elements that interact with each other and the outside world to serve different needs. That interplay results in an individual's unique way of knowing, their personal epistemology. Many authors have studied these elements in traditional, face-to-face learning environments; however, the role of the body in online learning environments remains largely unexplored. The multiple elements in traditional learning settings can be categorized as follows: a) physical body, b) personal body, c) political body, d) knowledgeable body, and e) expressive body. I will use these categories as a framework to consider the relationships between bodies in material and online learning environments. In my conclusion, I will use Tisdell's (1995) typology of feminist pedagogies to identify how knowledge and power, voice, authority, and difference to examine how these themes can be related to my framework how they can be considered in creating inclusive online learning contexts.

Material and Online Learning Environments

It is important to make some distinctions between the material and online learning environments, and between material and virtual bodies. In material, traditional or face-to-face learning environments, the material or organic body is present, though not necessarily acknowledged. I use this designation of material body to distinguish the material body, which encompasses the physical, personal, political, knowledgeable and expressive bodies, from the category of the physical body, which is described below. In the online learning environment, the material body is also often ignored. In some cases, the virtual body represents or replaces the physical body in the online environment, but more often the body remains absent. I do not use the term virtual learning environment because while the online learning environment will be technologically-mediated, it will not necessarily use the technology that is available to create a virtual representation of the material world, or virtual reality (Dall'Alba & Barnacle, 2005).

The Physical Body: Senses, Movement and Experience

First, the body is composed of the nerves, senses and cells that interact with the environment to acquire new knowledge; thus knowledge and experience are constructed. The only way to know what is outside the body is through the body which serves as an instrument for

gathering information about the environment through the senses; as Polanyi (1967) states, “our body is the ultimate instrument of all our external knowledge, whether intellectual or practical” (p. 15). The physical body also takes in information beyond that gathered through the senses as the learner reads, listens to speech, and manipulates objects. The body serves as the interface between the inside and outside worlds of the learner. It is through the acquisition of sensory information, considered in the context of previous knowledge, that the learner constructs a more complete understanding of the world.

While the body is primarily associated with the physical senses, it is important not to accentuate a divide between the mind and body. From a phenomenological perspective, the body and mind are intertwined. It is through the integrated knowing, acting and being of the mind and body that the individual interacts with the environment (Dall'Alba & Barnacle, 2005). Grosz (1994) provides additional support for the importance of the body in knowing. She argues that the body should not be viewed as separate from the mind; instead, she proposes that the mind and body should be considered as unified and interactive: “the unique meeting place of the corporeal (the body) and the circulating discourses (the network of ideas, practices, art, beliefs and so on that constitute culture)” (p. xii). Grosz’s statements affirm that learning can not occur simply in the mind; the body must also be involved. Grosz uses the Möbius strip as a metaphor for the relationship between mind and body:

bodies and minds are not two distinct substances or two kinds of attributes of a single substance but somewhere in between... The Möbius strip has the advantage of showing the inflection of mind into body and body into mind, the ways in which, through a kind of twisting or inversion, one side becomes another. (p. xii)

In online learning environments, the physical body tends to be ignored; but it continues to play an important role in the learning process, even if it is not explicitly acknowledged. In what Kazmer (2005) describes as “hybrid space” in the learning environment, online learners blend their own physical environments with the shared virtual environment to create a new, shared space for interaction. In this context the physical body continues to be a part of the learning context. To incorporate the physical body, educators can create opportunities for learners to interact with the environment by ensuring that course work includes interacting with people, ideas or course material outside of the online learning context. The instructor, instructional designer or facilitator can consider the following questions related to the physical body: What senses are learners using? Do learners have opportunities to interact with people or the environment in the assignments? Do learners have to use their bodies to manipulate objects, explore concepts or develop ideas?

The Personal Body: Limits and Boundaries

Secondly, the surface and extremities of the body of an individual identify its boundaries, which are essential in developing “personal identity and individuality” (Heim, 2001, p. 81) because they separate one individual from another. The physical boundaries of a body also establish its presence; because it is contained within a particular solid form, it can be present and acknowledged (Taylor, 2002). There are boundaries of the body that are established through dieting, cosmetic surgery, and posture, which “discipline” (Battersby, 1999, p. 347) the body to be seen as a limitation, rather than a space for expression. Conversely, for men, the body is a means for exploration. Young (2005) explains that “for many women as they move in sport, a space surrounds us in imagination that we are not free to move beyond; the space available to our movement is a constricted space” (p. 40-41). Similarly, Battersby (1999) states that the

“construction of a spatial field surrounding the female body [is] experienced as an enclosure [sic], instead of as a field in which her intentionality can be made manifest” (p. 347). However, establishing the limits of a body is not only a physical process; boundaries are also established through social inculcation. Grosz (1999) explains:

the body becomes a human body, a body that coincides with the ‘shape’ and space of a psyche, a body that defines the limits of experience and subjectivity only through the intervention of the (m)other and, ultimately, the Other (the language- and rule-governed social order). (p. 382)

In the online learning environment, technology can become a way to extend one’s personal boundaries to encompass new spaces: “As the body is extended through technology, students and teachers can ‘reach’ other locations in space and time” (Dall’Alba & Barnacle, 2005, p. 738). Similarly, authors like Haraway (2001) describe how technology can be used to expand the capacities and boundaries of the human body to create human-machine interfaces. Questions for educators related to the personal body include the following: What boundaries might learners experience? Can they explore new ideas, skills, places, or capacities through course assignments? How are learners being stretched and challenged in the online environment? How might that be reflected in a material context? How are learners limited by the online environment?

The Political Body: Inscription on the Body

Thirdly, the body is a surface upon which characteristics of race, gender, ability and culture are inscribed, influencing the identity of an individual and how others perceive that individual (Grosz, 1994). In this way, the body is a site for exploring political relationships of power between individuals and groups. Haraway (2001) affirms that when technology is involved “bodies are maps of power and identity” (p. 36). Bramble proposes that because “the body is central to knowledge production” and “bodies are embodied [sic] with knowledge” (p. 277, 278), perceptions of, and ways of understanding, the world are fundamentally influenced by the body. According to Chapman (1998), as Grosz theorizes about the body “she distinguishes between theories that are ‘inscriptive’, that focus on the body’s surface as the site where social, legal, moral and economic norms are inscribed, and approaches which focus on the interior, or lived body” (n.p.). Those bodies that are not consistent with the norm can face exclusion.

The political body can be difficult to include in the online learning context yet, the political body plays an important role in understanding and presenting the identity of learners. When the body remains invisible, learners must decide how to present themselves online using text rather than visual cues (Stacey, 2002). While the learner’s physical appearance may not be visible, social relationships continue to influence their interactions as social behaviours are replicated online and through language (Light & Light, 1999; Wakeford, 1999). Facilitators may want to ask the following questions: What opportunities do learners have to present their individual identity? What assumptions are made based on these presentations? What power relationships are developing among learners and facilitators? Can these relationships be used to challenge traditional social structures? How are positions of power acquired and maintained in the online learning environment? Do learners have the opportunity to discuss the power dynamics influencing them?

The Knowledgeable Body: Information Storage

Fourthly, the body is a storage place, where experiences and knowledge are stored within the mind, and skills and abilities are stored within the muscles. According to Polanyi (1967), individuals have knowledge, information and experiences that are stored within the body and the mind, and whose presence and origins may be outside their everyday awareness. Tacit understanding that is not usually verbalized, tactile memory and physical skills are all stored in the body. In this way, the knowledge stored in each body is unique to that individual and can only be expressed if the individual has the appropriate tools to identify and communicate that knowledge. Prichard (1999), in the context of the knowledge society and the knowledge economy, describes how knowledge is embodied in the workers within organizations. He explains that it is not the Marxist body of the labourer that is now valued within the organization but the knowledge-filled body of the employee. The employer seeks the body that presents “innovative performance, [and the] desire to share and tacit knowledge,” (p. 7).

Like the physical body, the knowledgeable body is present in online learning contexts even if it is not acknowledged. The need to verbalize one’s understanding and experiences in the online learning environment makes it necessary for learners to make explicit some of their tacit understanding (Anderson, 2001). Again, this process is often undertaken without any acknowledgement of the body’s role in learning and storing information. Educators may want to ask themselves these questions: What types of learning are necessary in this course? What types of knowledge are valued? What assumptions about previous experiences are made? How do learners make their knowledge and experience explicit? Are learners given direction about accessing tacit understanding or expressing taken-for-granted knowledge?

The Expressive Body: Communicating and Connecting with Others

Fifthly, through emotional reactions, verbal communication, physical contact and self-expression, the body is an instrument of communication and connection with other individuals. In an educational setting, the body can be a source of information for the learner about the atmosphere of a learning environment. Students report physical body actions and internal reactions to the emotional conditions and physical settings of an educational situation, and to events outside of an educational context. They also identify bodily reactions that occur with learning and with a failure to learn (McClelland, Dahlberg, & Plihal, 2002). This awareness of body behaviours and their meanings can benefit both the instructor and the learner by providing information about the learning environment, external distractions and the quality of learning.

In online learning environments, the emotional body can create connections through virtual interactions, but the timeframe for developing relationships may be different and may require ongoing attention to social presence factors (Stacey, 2002). In some online learning contexts, photographs or visual icons can be used to represent individual learners. When photographs are introduced at the appropriate time, they can help to form connections among users (Walther, Slovacek, & Tidwell, 2001). And, participation in online learning may lead learners to strengthen relationships with colleagues and to look for support from outside the learning context through family, friends, and colleagues (Kazmer & Haythornthwaite, 2001). Questions for educators to consider related to this topic include: What opportunities are there for learners to form social relationships? How do learners interact? What information is provided about developing and maintaining online relationships? Are learners encouraged to use multiple communication tools to interact? How can course material be integrated in offline settings such

as other courses or work? Are learners encouraged to share their learning with others outside of the course? How can emotional reactions be shared between learners?

Implications: Considering Tisdell's Typology

Tisdell (1995) identifies knowledge and power, voice, authority and difference as key themes in feminist pedagogy, and in 2000, she added shifting identities to the list of themes (Tisdell, 2000) she considers important in the creation of inclusive learning contexts. Tisdell's five themes can be seen in the framework for examining the body in online learning as discussed in this paper. The theme of knowledge and power in Tisdell's typology relates to the elements of the physical, knowledgeable and political bodies. All are concerned with the acquisition, sharing and use of knowledge, and the power associated with making decisions about knowledge. Tisdell's themes of voice and authority are related to the elements of the expressive and political bodies in that they focus on whose voices will be heard and considered. Similarly, Tisdell's difference and shifting identity themes relate to the personal and political bodies. They all focus on how individual difference is expressed and understood by individuals and communities. Like Tisdell's themes, each of the elements of the body has a significant role to play in creating inclusive learning environments, whether face-to-face or online.

While there has been research conducted about how to include the body in face-to-face learning contexts, this research has not been applied to the online learning context where the body tends to be ignored. Further consideration of the physical, personal, knowledgeable, political and expressive elements of the body can only help to create richer and more inclusive learning environments for all online learners.

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