A theory-practice gap in online higher education:

A failure of constructivist learning theories or
A victory of paradigm shift rhetoric?

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“It is a victory of the rhetoric!”

We shall see a gap in reality!

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Research problem

What does the quality online higher education look like?

Constructivist Learning Theory

≠ Actual Learning Practice
Discourse & Knowledge (Foucault, 1972)

“How and under which conditions has the theory-practice gap arisen in online higher education (HE)?”
Theory- Practice Gap

PART 1. Methodology

Discourse & Discursive Effects
Discourse of online higher education

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Shift happens
Online education as a new paradigm in learning

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Discourse ≠ Truth

Discourse = Regime of Truth

A Set of Knowledge, Rules and Regulations

“An institutionalized WAY of talking that REGULATES and reinforces action and thereby exerts POWER”

(Mills, 2003)
What does Foucault tell us about discourse? (2/3)

at a particular institution at a particular moment...
there are competing discourses

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What does Foucault tell us about discourse? (3/3)

How does it work?

1. Dominant discourse produces...

2. A Set of Knowledge, Rules and Regulations

3. Normalisation vs. Problematisation

4. Unequal conditions - Institutional benefits & penalties

5. Productive but oppressive discursive effects
Foucault questioning dominant discourses

I. Discourse

Archaeological question

How and under which conditions, has a certain discourse emerged and become dominant?

II. Discursive Effects

Genealogical question

What are the effects of the dominant discourse on members’ practices in a certain institution?
My study - critical discourse analysis

I. Discourse

Archaeological question

How and under which conditions, has the paradigm shift discourse emerged and become dominant?

II. Discursive Effects

Genealogical question

What are the effects of the paradigm shift discourse on members’ online HE practices in two open universities?”

Text Data

- Harasim’s article (2000)
- Institutional document
- Interview transcripts
  
Semi-structured interviews with 12 learning designers & 15 tutors

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PART 2.

Discourse & Discursive Effects
Online education has shifted a fundamental learning paradigm in higher education.

“Online education provides new modes of educational delivery, new learning domains, new principles of learning, new learning processes and outcomes, and new educational roles and entities”

(Harasim, 2000, p. 45)
Online education provides “24/7 access expanded air time for discussion and reflection, allowing everyone to have a voice, overcoming challenges, and traditional discrimination factors, such as ageism, sexism, and racism” (p. 54).

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“... the concept of producing knowledge by collaborating in groups” encapsulates the essence of the new learning paradigm that online education has brought into higher education. (p. 54)
Discursive Statement 3:
Instructors are not a knowledge provider but learners are responsible in knowledge construction.

“Over 15,000 students and 220 instructors participated in over 429 courses.” (p. 50)

100% of Virtual-U courses incorporated some form of networking and collaborative learning activities and students actively participated in those activities.
Step 2: “Paradigm shift” claim becomes rhetoric

Three conditions...

- A technological deterministic – essentialist view
- Pre-accepted constructivism – Neoliberal educational culture
- New millennium! Great excitement of – aspiration for progress
Step 3: The rhetoric becomes dominant discourse

“... shifts and paradigmatic changes in pedagogical practice resulting from the implementation of the new technologies... (Harasim, 2000)”


“... enabling the creation of online learning communities for construction of shared knowledge across barriers of space and time... (Harasim, 2000)”

(Papastergiou, 2006, p. 595).
PART 3.

Discourse & Discursive Effects
Discursive effects 1: Categorisation

Behaviorism

Cognitivism

Constructivism

Social Constructivism
Discursive effects 2: Normalisation

OLD - BAD

Behaviorism

Cognitivism

NEW - GOOD

Constructivism

Social Constructivism

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### Discursive effects 3: Oversimplification

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Oversimplification of</th>
<th>The rhetoric serves to dismiss</th>
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<tr>
<td>• online HE practices</td>
<td>• the diversity of the form of online HE</td>
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<td></td>
<td>» the historicity of pedagogical practice</td>
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<td>» the specificity of context and participants</td>
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<tr>
<td>• pedagogical changes</td>
<td>• the complexity of any pedagogical and social changes</td>
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- Online HE has been perceived as a singular enterprise so controlled by a singular paradigm.

- Pedagogical changes have been perceived as a simple adoption of new theory and technology.
Discursive effects 4: Being prescriptive

- The **paradigm** shift discourse produces prescriptive knowledge, rules and regulations and so invite volitional changes.

There are incommensurable differences between the old paradigm and the new paradigm in terms of the “set of rules and standards about truth”.

(Popkewitz & Brennan, 1997, p.300)

Paradigm is often misused in school reform projects as a powerful tool to force teachers as change agent to accept and follow authoritarian voices in educational campaigns. (Stickney, 2006)

- Constructivist learning theories have become prescriptive providing universal principles and mechanical models to follow.

- A gap emerged!
Discursive Statement 1:
Online Ed is an accessible and democratic group communication phenomenon.

“It was all about how this online learning business was going to cut the cost. So once that started being a part of discourse well... that was it! I will say it’s more the economics of it than pedagogy.”
“Online Ed has been developed more into an individualized and flexible educational mode with self-paced courses and any group communication... has been extremely restricted even though Internet communication technologies have been made available.”

“Interaction with peers... is for universities who have a cohort, but in our environment, [it is more important whether] it’s easy to navigate, the instruction is clear, the material is clear.”
Discursive Statement 3: Instructors are not a knowledge provider but learners are responsible in knowledge construction.

“You can allow marginal students or many even incompetent students into the system. So you reduce the barriers to get in but they are not going to get out, right? Because they are just not capable of doing university level...

I face this numerous times... It’s my job to show that the [incapable] student has problems but can overcome those problems... Grammar Nazi (laughing)... the first thing for me is to take care of business for students.”
Conclusion

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• We need to challenge the paradigm shift rhetoric in online HE and its discursive effects.

• Accepting the diverse learning paradigms and embracing pedagogical historicity and contextual specificity of different online HE practices.

• “Perception or apprehension of concrete particulars” (Kessels & Korthagen, 1996, p. 19) in their practice may reduce the theory-practice gap in online HE.