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Three Lenses on Lurking: Making Sense of Digital Silence

Caroline Kuhn, Leo Havemann, Suzan Koseoglu, Aras Bozkurt

Abstract: In this chapter, we provide a critical exploration of the concept of lurking in online learning spaces through a phenomenological inquiry. We begin from a position that lurking is often misunderstood—or perhaps not understood—in education, and that the term itself is quite problematic, as it is typically applied to a disparate range of behaviors by those who perceive them as problematic. We then propose three heuristic lenses to make sense of lurking behaviors: *lurking as troublesome*, *lurking as ordinary practice*, and *lurking as political*. These lenses demonstrate that lurking behaviors not only stem from a range of different motivations but are also situated in a variety of contexts, that is, lurking is personal and contextual. Our aim is not to define or redefine lurking for readers but to provide a critical analysis of what digital silence might mean for our students based on our contextual experience and in the light of critical literature. We invite readers to be part of the reflexive analysis by considering what lurking might mean in their own teaching contexts.

Keywords: *Lurking, lurkers, critical digital pedagogy, HE, online learning*

Introduction

Lurking is often seen as a problem in online education, particularly in fully online, distance/distributed learning contexts. Blended learning, in which students attend face-to-face sessions, as well as making use of online platforms, does not tend to provoke the same educator anxiety; and similarly, in the context of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and other less formal online learning practices, perhaps learners tend to be afforded more of a 'right to lurk'. And yet, some amount of negative connotations appear to follow 'lurking' wherever it appears - or rather, doesn't; lurking is, after all, conspicuous by absence, and ambiguity.

In this chapter, we begin from a position that lurking is often misunderstood, and indeed that the term itself is quite problematic, as it is typically applied to a disparate range of behaviors by those who perceive them as problematic, rather than by 'lurkers' themselves. This suggests that there is a disconnect between the different meanings of the term 'lurking', and various behaviors which might be described as lurking. Dictionary definitions (see below) have begun to include reference to online behaviors, but it seems that while this sense of lurking is nominally value-neutral, the nuance of the traditional use, implying a covert and perhaps even predatory practice, has stickiness. Lurking generally appears to be viewed as evidence of a deficit in learning in online spaces—an unwillingness to engage, in a space where we as educators are seeking (even demanding) visible engagement.

The Merriam-Webster dictionary (2020a) describes lurking as:

- to lie in wait in a place of concealment especially for an evil purpose
- to move furtively or inconspicuously

- to persist in staying
- to be concealed but capable of being discovered, specifically: to constitute a latent threat
- to lie hidden
- to read messages without contributing on an internet discussion forum

Lurking is one way of learning (Bozkurt, Koutropoulos, Singh, & Honeychurch, 2020), or as Duran (2020) argues, learners are cognitively engaged in learning even if there is no interaction with other learners. Learning is a multidimensional concept and a contextual act (Dennen, 2008) therefore it is challenging to define. Similarly, it is difficult to identify why some learners prefer lurking (Bozkurt et al., 2020; Nonnecke, & Preece, 1999; Preece, Nonnecke, & Andrews, 2004; Ridings, Gefen, & Arinze, 2006; Sun, Rau, & Ma, 2014) because it is claimed that learners tend to lurk by default in online learning environments (Soroka, & Rafaeli, 2006) and their reasons seem to be valid in many cases (Nonnecke, Andrews, & Preece, 2006). Some characteristics of lurkers such as being invisible and silent, provide less observable learning processes and, therefore, some may incline to claim that learning does not happen (Beaudoin, 2003). This is because learning is generally associated with observable processes and outcomes in many outcomes-based pedagogical approaches, especially in behaviorist and cognitivist traditions, but in learner-centered approaches as well, such as constructivism. In constructivism, learning is seen as "active construction of knowledge in relation to [learners'] existing knowledge and understanding" (Weller, 2016, p. 67). The strong emphasis on creating and constructing knowledge through active learning may lead educators to seek *visible action* as evidence of active learning, which may position lurking as an undesirable behavior.

The problem in interpreting lurking and lurkers in this way, in our view, comes from a more traditional stance in face-to-face learning settings. However, online learning provides more flexibility; being invisible or silent can be considered opportunities which stem from this flexibility. In the ambiguity of who are the lurkers, and how they learn, this chapter explores lurking and lurkers through a heuristic, phenomenological perspective. Our goal is to problematize the meaning of lurking and suggest other ways for readers to consider digital silence. We begin this exploration with an experience that connected all of us, the authors, and prompted the shared inquiry into digital silence.

Reflecting on the Lurker Experience

On July 13, 2018, the authors of this chapter took part in a Twitter slow chat (a form of tweet chat which goes on for an extended period such as a day or more) on open educational practices with the #HEdigID (Higher Education Digital Identity) hashtag. The hashtag was created by Laura Pasquini "to discuss what it means to be online as a Higher Ed professional (e.g., staff, faculty, graduate students, etc.) today" (Pasquini, 2018). Although we come from diverse backgrounds and work in different Higher Education contexts (in UK and Turkey), we are all critical scholars in the field of Open, Online and Distance Education and have occasionally taken part in hashtag events to meet with other scholars and contemplate on issues that matter to all of us.

While an all-day chat on open educational practices was planned, discussions continued for several days (and for the authors, well beyond) as participants talked about diverse, yet related topics. The chat was public and networked in nature. When we visualize the tagged #HEdigID conversation, we can see that the most active (black and dark blue)

participants gather around at the core of the network; less active (purple), and peripheral (pink) participants scatter around the mid-to-outer layers of the network (Figure 1). In this case and many other examples, network formation in online learning spaces tends to follow a similar pattern.

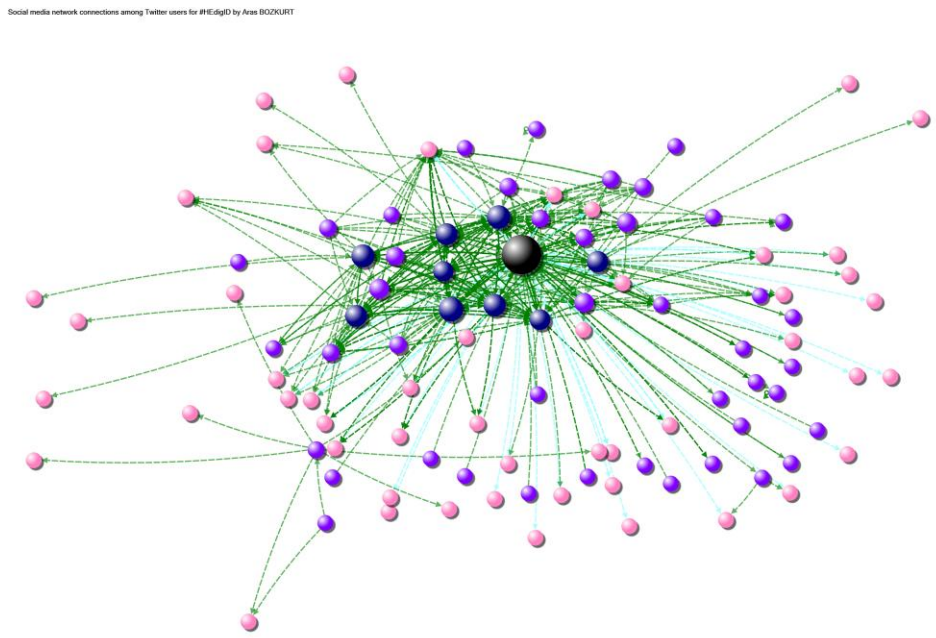


Figure 1. Social Network Analysis visualization of the #HEdigID Twitter Chat via NodeXL.

However, we soon realized that the #HEdigID network was much more than what we could observe and make sense of. The reach of the network (in particular, we realized, one long conversation on participation and lurking) included 'invisible' participants—some people sent us tweets days after the "official" chat saying that they had been there, but simply 'listening in', or just picking up elements of the chat intermittently. Even those seemingly in the center of the conversation were dipping in and out. Curiously, one of the authors of this chapter was lurking more than actively participating - but nevertheless had a genuine interest in the topic, so her participation was intense but not entirely visible. She

also already knew some of the people that were involved, which inspired trust and confidence to join the conversation, which might otherwise have been absent.

Overall, participation patterns on and as a result of #HEdigID almost looked anarchic in this open space, in the sense that it was "lacking order, regularity, or definiteness," (Merriam-Webster, 2020b) as can often be the case in loosely organized online conversations. #HEdigID had become an exemplar of the kind of conversation in which some participants are highly visible, and others "lurk", with a subset of these sometimes appearing, seemingly out of nowhere to interject or comment, and a further uncountable cohort likely present but not appearing at all. Some tweets and threads related to #HEdigID were 'lost' from our archive (and as a result were not included in the Social Network Analysis above) because participants weren't tagging their tweets with the hashtag identifier. Like a breakout conversation in a class, these participants were actively engaged, but as they either failed or refused to leave a discoverable trace after the event, the behavior of these participants can also be read as *lurking*.

The discussions in the chat, and reflections on our experiences (as networked, open educators and researchers) revealed some of the complexities of lurking behaviors. Starting with ourselves, it is apparent we all seemingly lurk at different times, in different places, for different reasons (Watling, 2018). Within our own contexts, we tend to see it as a question of choice and priority rather than automatically as a negative practice—in contrast with a fairly common view in online education—so why should it be any different for our students? Further questions were raised in the group: Why are some learners visible and others less visible or even invisible in online and networked learning? Do we need to rethink what participation means? What active learning is? What (or who) is a "lurker"?

In order to further explore these complexities of lurking behaviors we organized a workshop at the OER19 conference[1], attended by ten participants who discussed their views about lurking, as seen through three interrelated sense-making lenses we proposed (Kuhn, Havemann, Koseoglu, Bozkurt, & Watling, 2019), based upon our lived experiences and in the light of the relevant literature: *lurking as troublesome*, *lurking as ordinary practice*, and *lurking as political*. These lenses demonstrate that lurking behaviors not only stem from a range of different motivations but are also *situated* in a variety of contexts. Lurking, as we have come to understand, is a relational and plural construct; it is tied to place, the nature of the digital space -the platform, people, motivations as well as worldviews, as we discuss next.

Lurking Through Three Lenses

Lurking as Troublesome

Central to our group conversation about lurking has been the sense that it tends to be viewed negatively, whether sympathetically (e.g., as indicating a need for facilitator intervention), or otherwise. Whatever those who demonstrate lurking behaviors are called - "silent learners, observers, browsers, read-only participants, vicarious learners, free-riders, witness learners, legitimate peripheral participants" (Honeychurch, Bozkurt, Singh, & Koutropoulos, 2017, p. 194) or non-public participants (Nonnecke, & Preece, 2003), invisible participation by a student results in digital silence for the educator. This lack is

[1] OER19 in Galway, Ireland, was one of the OER (Open Educational Resources/Research) series of conferences which gather scholars, practitioners, students and other interested parties to discuss open education and its practices.

often experienced by online educators as *troublesome*, whether it is assumed to reflect a lack of interest, engagement, effort, or capabilities. It contradicts pedagogic theories based on social constructivism and the principles of active learning design. For example, in one of the chapter author's experiences, digital silence was something to be avoided in a completely online class she was teaching at a large public university. She encouraged her students to actively contribute to class activities, even if they did not feel like it, because there was an assumption that all students would learn better in a lively community of practice, and visible engagement was the starting point to achieve that.

Indeed, from the teacher's point of view, facilitating learning online can feel like talking to empty rooms or speaking into black holes if students do not signal their presence to others. Invitations to collaborate can go unanswered while structured activities built around selecting, sharing and synthesizing remain untouched. The online student can be both present and absent. Without visible participation, there are few ways of knowing what is really going on. This may be more of a problem for the anxious online educator—and perhaps other students—than for the silent participant. In what ways does silence contain messages we are not receiving? When we view silence in digital spaces as troublesome and in need of intervention, we might ask questions such as, what if lurking students are struggling with their learning? What if they are stuck in digitally-uncertain liminal states, present but rendered absent through non-participation, because after all, no one has taught them to be digitally literate or helped them understand what self-efficacy looks like online? Students may feel under surveillance by tutors and peers, nervous of the permanence of committing thoughts to text and unsure about the parameters of digital performance. They might feel comfortable with the personal and private elements of digital

identity and less sure about the public and professional dimensions, which they might be encountering for the first time. Maybe they are digitally shy, nervous about contributing in case their ideas are seen as being wrong and are fearful others will make fun of them. As one of the participants of our workshop at the OER19 conference shared: "imposter syndrome sometimes stops me from contributing to academic Twitter chats. Do I belong in this community? Do I have something of value to share?"

Lurking as Ordinary

As our group explored lurking in the literature, we observed that there is a tendency in the educational discourse to treat lurkers as a homogenous group with more or less the same characteristics, and lurking as a category of behavior that is a reflection of personal traits or dispositions, for example, being an introvert, (Árnason et al., 2017). But the meaning of this un-communicative non-presence perhaps cannot be decoded so readily or reduced so rapidly to a learner's lack of skills, and therefore, of learning. On reflection, we have come to a firm conclusion that the idea of 'the lurker' as a type of person or a category of behavior is a myth in online education which reflects a deterministic view of appropriate learning. This is the privilege of the visible and measurable over the invisible and the non-measurable. It obscures the value of reading, reflecting, and other solitary, often unseen learning activities. What if, we asked, lurking is not troublesome, what if it is actually something quite ordinary in learning and for the learner? What if we understand lurking as a normal, mundane behavior that any learner or participant engaged in online spaces, part of the time?

Some of these questions were discussed in our workshop and one participant said:

> *I haven't been happy with the term 'lurking' for a long time! Engagement doesn't have to be externally visible, a lot of academic/intellectual work is done away from the public eye, reading, thinking, observing. This undermines the attendance=engagement=attainment debate - students can be present and disengaged, or absent and very engaged.*

Should lurking be understood as a legitimate alternative to the fetishization of the active, self-directed student who has no right to silence? Some of our participants would answer that lurking is not only a legitimate activity but a meaningful one when she said,

> *Lurking—or spending some time on the periphery of interaction— is a meaningful human activity, online and offline. We cannot be actively engaging at all times. Yet we observe, learn, ponder, rest, reflect, refresh, hang out, and contribute our presence quietly.*

In the light of some of these comments, and acknowledging that more empirical research is needed, there is a tendency to believe in line with another participant of the workshop that there are "more richness and ways we can value this ordinariness" asking if we could see "-lurking as active listening, lurking as normal socialization in a community, lurking as reflection?" Complementing this view and thinking on ways to reclaim lurking as ordinary behavior, another participant added that "the perceived lack of engagement could be reimagined as symbolizing authentic participation and, if silence has value, opportunities for non-visible participation needs to be embedded into learning designs." Reclaiming lurking as ordinary and valid behavior was a strong claim in our workshop. However, this is not the only perspective on lurking there is; participation looks different for different people, and as we said before, it is contextual and personal.

Lurking as Political

Perhaps, we need to augment our bifocal lens to include a political dimension that includes the idea of lurking not only as ordinary or troublesome but possibly as an act of resistance, as a deliberate answer to some kind of transgression, or as Shor (2014) would say, lurking as "defensively silent" (p. 93). Understanding lurking from a political lens forces us to look at (uneven/unbalanced) social structures and relations in education. Lurking could be a deliberate and conscious act of resistance; it is also possible that lurking is an action or a reaction that has not yet been fully internalized by the learner; hence, it would be important to explore what learners are resisting. Freire (2017) reminds us that it is in the critical observation and analysis of one's struggle that potential pathways to change can be created.

As lurking is relational and situated it is dangerous to make assumptions; maybe a way into the resistant lurker is to take their social particularities, their struggles and their negotiations as a starting point and in so doing we will make *the political more pedagogical* as Shor and Freire (1987) would suggest us to do. Critical pedagogy is troubled with how education, in the traditional way, perpetuates inequality and oppression. Critical digital pedagogy, as Stommel (2014) and Morris (2014) have argued, is concerned with alleviating oppression, inequality, and human suffering in digital spaces. The aim would be to find ways in which students can become aware of the sources of oppression, injustice or exclusion that keeps them silent and on the margins, and think together how these oppressive systems could be dismantled. If this is the aim, we wonder how can someone that lurks as an act of resistance be at the center of any program of critical pedagogy in online spaces? This could be an opportunity for instructional designers and educators because from these

bleak circumstances a contact zone of ideals and realities could emerge -what Giroux (1985) has called the fertile terrain of contestation from which true transformative growth can arise. An interesting avenue to explore is what are the things that need to be in place for the contact zone to emerge.

To shed light on this exploration it can be helpful to look at how Freire (2017) taught adults who did not have the literacy of the schooled ones to be able to recognize some of the oppressive structures they were part of. The same thing can be said for online environments, namely, there is a lack of academic digital literacies in young and not so young people. Figure 2 illustrates the point through a screenshot taken from the main screen of the lecture hall with 200 year-one students of a pot-92 UK university, who were asked if they knew what digital literacies are. The majority, as it can be seen, answered that they had no idea what these literacies were about.

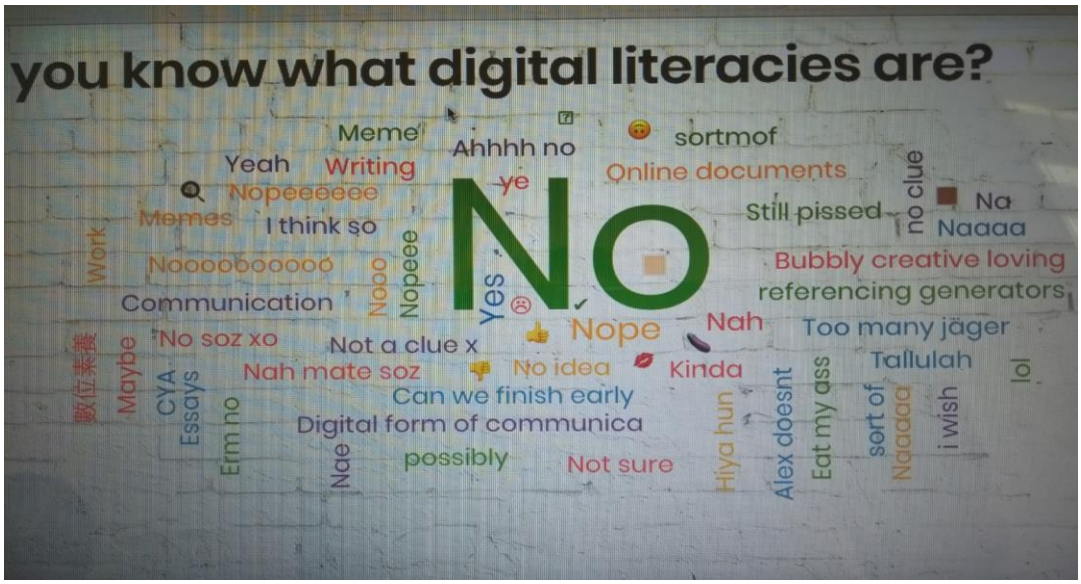


Figure 2. Student responses to the question: You know what digital literacies are?

As a participant signaled in the #HEdigID twitter discussion,

> *Contributors are usually coming from a place of privilege. The unwritten rules in certain Twitter networks is that you have to provide value first and build your 'Twitter capital' by retweeting and signal boosting. Once you have raised your profile sufficiently, you will get more engagement and responses. The quickest way of measuring this is to tweet a question. It can be gutting when there are no responses!*

From the comment above we can see that there are a set of literacies needed to be able to interact in today's complex and fluid digital ecosystems. But it would be far too simplistic to think that what is lacking are the skills and know-how alone for navigating these relatively new online practices. Skills, knowledge and understanding are one side of the story but what is also needed is the provision of designed opportunities to participate in online spaces, as DiMaggio and Hargittai (2001) and Livingstone (2009) have argued. If we take Shor's (1996, p. 1) perspective of "students as exiles in the culture war of the classroom", we could think, as he did, that [online] classrooms have also "far Siberias" and that learners are the Siberian that are systematically sent to the rear of every session—the seeming aliens, the non-participants, the intellectually vanquished who populate the disempowered margins of education. Those who were not included or as Fraser (1995, 2000) would put it, they were not recognized and misrepresented, in the design of the learning experience. In our view, education ought to be for those learners as well, thus the learning environments need to be designed in consequence. The line between *lurking as troublesome* and *lurking as political* is very fine. We need analytical tools and magnifying glasses to find ways in which we can use that resistance as the material for learning, for discussing the reality that learners are experiencing, if our aim as educators is to support the process of change and emancipation. The ones who lurk are maybe doing it as a conscious act of resistance, but

maybe they are in such a position that they do not have the literacies and more so, the capability, that is, literacies but also designed opportunities to participate.

Conclusion and Suggestions

In this chapter we have explored mysterious silences across varied digital learning contexts, the possible meanings of such silences, and the question of their legitimacy or otherwise. We have also challenged approaches to learning that assumes participation to be active and loud instead of complex and more silent. We see our three proposed lenses as a starting point to investigate the many and potentially layered reasons for silence in online and networked spaces. Whichever way we tweak our pedagogic lens, lurking behaviors demand attention. Whether they are a valid expression of learning, a symptom of distress, or an act of protest, it seems there is a need to turn a critical lens onto our assumptions and think deeply about how privileging the visible may constrain and exclude learners. For this we suggest that an open pedagogical approach based on a critical digital pedagogy baseline geared towards social justice (Hodgkinson-Williams, & Trotter, 2018; Lambert, 2018) could be an alternative to traditional approaches to online learning.

Putting this narrative together has been a process of negotiating our differing perspectives - but without a more plural debate, this narrative is always partial and incomplete. if we don't include learners in this discussion, as Bali and Sharma (2014, para 4) wrote, "the very basis of our critique may be singular, limiting, and exclusive of other critical perspectives." Going forward, we see ourselves further investigating the way we, as co-

learners, relate to spaces and others within them, and the ephemeral and ever-changing nature of our presence in online spaces.

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