

Social technologies in higher education: Authorship, subjectivity and temporality

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Abstract

The volatile modes of online interaction characterised as ‘Web 2.0’ often sit uncomfortably within existing higher education practice. The communicative landscapes opened up by social media can be spaces of strangeness and troublesomeness to the academy, both epistemologically and ontologically. They entail a shift toward new and volatile forms of textual mediation and subject formation. They alter relations between process and artefact, permit fragmentation over cohesion, and are characterised by endless re-crafting, often involving rapid patterns of amendment and revision. They are a product of speed and ‘fast time’ operating through trust and consensus, whereas the cloistered, analogue academy has required slow time, reflection and reference to authority and the authoritative. Yet universities are currently appropriating and repurposing such technologies for learning and teaching, often in novel, productive and enjoyable ways. This paper draws on recent empirical data to examine ways in which the academy is working to curtail the radical potential of these digital modes, while at the same time engaging with some of the radical uncertainty which the learners of the future must competently and critically navigate.

Keywords

Authorship, appropriation, anti-structure, digital, distanciation, liminality, temporality.

Introduction: the digital turn in higher education

The last two decades have witnessed, as part of the wider phenomena of globalisation and ‘supercomplexity’ (Barnett, 2000), an inexorable shift in higher education from print-based culture to digital. This shifting emphasis has occasioned different ways of generating and engaging with knowledge. Print culture, in the form of the stable, bounded, individual and private text, has tended to operate within, and to reinforce, patterns of authority and individualized authorship. The digital, more protean and volatile, is concerned increasingly with image, openness, multimodality and collectivity. It works more from collaborative enquiry and production, inviting contestability but also requiring consensus and trust. The playful modes of online interaction characterised as ‘Web 2.0’ often sit uncomfortably within existing higher education practice. Textual instability, according to Barnett (2005) comes to function as a reflection of instability in the university’s idea of itself. The new media, characterised by their volatility, multivocality and radical contestability, come to be implicated in the 21st century university’s difficulty in maintaining and asserting its traditional authority. In this way the communicative landscapes opened up by social media can be troublesome to the academy, and are redolent of the spaces of strangeness, both epistemologically and ontologically, of which Barnett (2005) speaks:

we now live in a world of radical contestation and challengeability, a world of uncertainty and unpredictability. In such a world, all such notions – as truth, fairness, accessibility and knowledge – come in for scrutiny. In such a process of continuing reflexivity, fundamental concepts do not dissolve but, on the contrary, become systematically elaborated. (Barnett 2005, p.789)

The study discussed in this paper has examined the experience of learners and teachers when Web 2.0 technologies, or social media, are employed within formal academic settings. We investigated four courses, two entirely online, two blended, in two large UK research universities. Across these courses, formal learning activities were conducted using weblogs, wikis, virtual worlds and social bookmarking. The disciplinary contexts included E-Learning, Engineering Design and Divinity. The study was funded by the UK Higher Education Academy.

Working with social media: shifts in the nature of knowledge

Social technologies entail a shift toward new, often volatile forms of textual mediation and subject formation. Such developments place increasing emphasis on collaborative modes of enquiry and the importance of group self-regulation and self-explanation. They alter relations between process and artefact, permit fragmentation over cohesion, exploration over exposition, the visual over the textual and, perhaps, convenience over quality. Alexander (2006) suggests that it is the quality of ‘openness’ that is the characteristic hallmark of such media, ideologically and technologically. They are characterised by endless re-crafting and addition.

These sections of the web break away from the page metaphor. Rather than following the notion of the web as book, they are predicated on *microcontent*. Blogs are about posts, not pages. Wikis are streams of conversation, revision, amendment, and truncation. (Alexander, 2006, p.32)

This capacity of the digital for rapid editing, instantaneous cut-and-paste, offers the promise of progress and unlimited perfectibility, though what is gained is, in reality, only ever provisional stability. The perplexing volatility and instability of digital text – infinitely re-editable and instantly distributable – defies methods for imposing closure and authorial control. Continued exploration and contestability are emphasised in place of settled knowledge. The challenge of the endless incompleteness of open digital text, its permanent state of new ideas and emergence, its endless revisability and mutability, the networked nature of its knowledge, its privileging of access over possession, and furthermore, its unclear and ambiguous positioning on the public/private continuum all seem to undermine the authority of academic knowledge. Such knowledge has traditionally been necessary as the foundation of research evidence, and hence of veracity and the verifiable. In this respect the changing nature of Web 2.0 media seem implicated in the university’s inability to claim universality in its pursuit of truth, and to be characterised by the supercomplexity Barnett sees as integral to the 21st century academy.

In this process of infinite elaboration, concepts are broken open and subjected to multiple interpretations; and these interpretations may, and often do, conflict. As a result, we no longer have stable ways even of describing the world that we are in; the world becomes multiple *worlds*. (Barnett 2005, p.789)

The writing and learning spaces represented by this ‘read/write web’ are defined by what O’Reilly (2004) has called an ‘architecture of participation’, increasingly oriented toward distributed authorship, collaboration and social networking (Alexander 2006). Web 2.0 learning spaces act more as points of presence, or user-defined web spaces, than as traditional web sites or discussion fora. Web content tends to be less under the control of specialised ‘designers’ and closer to Berners-Lee’s (2000) concept of the web as a democratic, personal, and DIY medium of communication. Because it is this social aspect of what is arguably a new web paradigm which, we have found, is of most salience to higher education, we generally prefer the term ‘social technology’ or ‘social media’ to ‘web 2.0’ itself, which has now become an over-used and often misappropriated term.

Students writing digitally: re-thinking the nature of authorship

Our observations of students working in such digital environments, and specifically writing within wikis, provided an interesting re-thinking of the nature of authorship. There was a sense among some learners that the wiki space almost gives permission to ‘be’ a writer in a new way:

The wiki has been a very engaging totally new experience as contributor/author. At first, it was daunting. The idea of contributing content/s and with personalised examples to a web page that so many people can read, well, it’s just something that I thought only writers would want to get into.

Reading by scrolling up, down; clicking back and forth and in a non linear way with the hyperlinks and videos made the reading of contents more dynamic and in my case more conducive to remembering and learning many new concepts. I loved the possibility of organising and editing your new /old contents with immediate hyperlinks to references, translations, images, other pages in the wiki or web with certain ease of use. (Discussion board contribution from U)

These reflections on the nature of authorship within the wiki were echoed by students on other courses. As one wrote within his weblog:

In making a couple of entries and rephrasing some of the headers it occurred to me that my 'marks' in the text are probably ephemeral. They will endure for as long as the interval between editing (minor or major). So a wiki is a dynamic text – it really doesn't have a form but (changing) content. When is it considered completed? Is it just a provisional evolving set of microcontent, juxtaposed texts? Is it pure luck that the 'authors' who endure manage to leave a lasting trace are those who happen to arrive at the end – when the 'uberauthor' (the course tutor?) halts the process? The process, of course, could just go on, ended by boredom, or exhaustion (everyone 'written out'). But then the process of social writing could simply be renewed as new 'authors' join the fray. (Weblog posting from H)

In a textual space where text is characterised by ephemerality and authorship is problematised, students across all three courses were concerned about ways in which they might accurately attribute authorship and spent some time considering and negotiating the forms of etiquette which applied to the editing and re-factoring of each other's work.

In thinking about editing the text produced by someone else – I felt a considerable reluctance. It somehow seemed unacceptable to mess around with someone's work. ... Certainly this is an interesting collaborative exercise. Good fun if only I can allow myself more latitude to alter what is there without feeling I'll give offence! I'm really intrigued by it – wicked. (Weblog posting by H)

I do think wikis tend to present a finished product that is a consensus more than something like a discussion board, or at least lay out the arguments in several groups. ... I think we have to not be afraid to delete each other's text in the wiki, which is a different way of thinking than the discussion board, and a more sensitive one. (Discussion board posting by C)

Social media and the negotiation of identity

In interviews with students, issues to do with the negotiation of identity and voice while blogging were foregrounded. One issue virtuality opens up is the possibility of manipulation and, by implication, deceit in how people present themselves to others (Bayne 2005). Such concerns tend, however, to overstate the distinction between the virtual and non-virtual spaces people inhabit and how the two interact. One of the overwhelming themes, in student responses to the dilemma of the relationship between their virtual and 'real' identities, was the need to maintain some degree of affinity between the two. This was expressed in their blogs as the need to be 'honest' to themselves. This is described by one student as follows:

I liked to think that I was honest about my identity because I was able to be reflective, I didn't try to hide my feelings, I was actually very honest about what I was thinking at any particular time, and I didn't try and pretend to be somebody else. I felt that it was a fair reflection on my own personal identity, or maybe my own professional identity with a mixture of my personal feelings as well. (Telephone interview with S)

The idea of 'honesty' is interesting because it associates the possibility of presenting alternative constructions of identity as being morally wrong even when it is virtually possible. But the 'black and white' nature of this construction leaves little room for the grey spaces between – although some students were willing to explore this. For example, one student commented that the blog allowed him to 'open up' a little more than a face-to-face situation would normally permit:

...there was a sense in which, in that one that I was disclosing stuff about me, who I am, you know, which is opening up myself to a certain degree. But I think it's a mixture...sometimes I consciously try to separate myself and would see something as an experiment, and I am just playing with, and it's not really me. I mean I don't know whether this is me or not, but I am kind of just inventing something here. So sometimes I got a bit blurred perhaps.
(Face-to-face interview with G)

Most writing involves writing for an audience and is part of a social practice rather than an event that occurs in a vacuum. One important aspect of the context within which blogging was used in one of our observed courses was its status as an assessed piece of work. The assessment of the blog perhaps represents another aspect of its curtailment – the sense in which this public, fragmented and 'slippery' form of writing was brought within the constrained and relatively rigid frameworks of formal assessment practice. For one tutor, this was far less a compromise than a positive advantage over other forms of student assessment:

There is also conscious desire to think about how these new social networking tools make possible new forms of expression, and so to use a blog for example as an assessed part of the course, is interesting, a lot of the issues that students have with writing for assessment is that they do not really have a vision of who the audience is and the blogging changes that. So for example I came across a recent study which suggested that if you are looking at programmes to enhance English as a second language then using a blog in that context was better than a paper diary in engaging the students in their language development and that in turn was better than written essays, as written exercises. So the blog as an assessment tool brings back the notion of audience into the frame, so I think that is important. (Face to face interview with C)

As can be seen in this last case, assessment practices, in particular, based within institutional and regulatory frameworks informed and constituted by the established print paradigm, can be ill-suited to mesh with the seemingly strange new practices learners are pursuing in the digital age. Despite this we found that universities are increasingly experimenting with, appropriating and repurposing such technologies for learning and teaching, often in novel, productive and enjoyable ways.

Web 2.0: anti-structure and curtailment

The notion of curtailing Web 2.0's 'slipperiness' invites further consideration. One theoretical lens that might be brought to bear on the function of social technologies within higher education is the notion of *anti-structure*, taken from the anthropological work of Turner (1969). Anti-structure is a more fluid, transformative and often unfamiliar space, where traditional or conventional structures can be (temporarily) transgressed or challenged. Woocher defines it as:

periods of time and modalities of relationship in which normal social structural patterns are suspended, altered, or transcended. Anti-structure finds primary expression in the phenomena of liminality and communitas (a relatively unstructured and undifferentiated communion of individuals) (Woocher, 1977, p.503)

This would account for the counter-cultural quality of much Web 2.0 type activity, given its characteristic attributes described earlier, and clarify its 'contrapuntal' position vis-à-vis the formal systemic practices of higher education. In keeping with anti-structural behaviours in other social and cultural settings, this perspective would also point to the eventual re-absorption, appropriation or re-purposing of Web 2.0 technologies by the formal system, before further anti-structural activities of a different nature would be likely to emerge. This to some extent was what emerged from our empirical studies. During our research, we found a tendency for both teachers and learners to appropriate and ultimately 'rein in' and curtail these potentially radical and challenging effects of the new media formations, to control and constrain them within more orthodox understandings of authorship, assessment, collaboration and formal learning. For example the purpose of the blog on one course that we observed was to allow students to reflect on their course experience, to address their understanding of issues as they arose and to engage with tutors in a one-to-one environment. The tutors on this course were aware that their choice of a private (and assessed)

blogging environment was in a sense a compromise, yet they felt that the pedagogical benefits of this approach were quite significant:

I am not sure that what we are doing in the weblog is a Web 2.0 type use of blogs because they are not community blogs in the way that they might be. ...In the context of this course, which is an introductory course, part of the idea of using private blogs was to give students a place where their tutor could give them reassuring and personal feedback, so it is a support mechanism, in a way. In terms of collaborative blogging, you have all those advantages of collaborative group working, of collaborative knowledge construction and so on which you do not get with a private blog. But a group blog is more like a discussion board in the sense that it is public and that people are having to think very carefully about what they say, they are thinking about the rest of the group, about having to negotiate a voice which is acceptable to the whole group, whereas with a private blog we would like to think that they can feel more relaxed, and freer to express things in a stream of consciousness way if they like where there is not so much at stake, if you like, with a private blog. And that is the idea with this course, that it is somewhere where we can support students to develop ideas in a reasonably secure and safe environment. (Face to face interview with M)

The tutors on this course were aware, however, of the need continually to revise and re-work their understanding of the function of the blog, in terms of balancing the desire for collaboration, networking and risk with the sense of security and 'safety' for students. This in itself presented something of a tension in their understandings of the course design in relation to blogging. As one of the other tutors on this course commented:

There are a number of problems, and if you talk about paradox in a sense, we want the blog experience, I think, that we would encourage the students into, to be as real as possible, and that is an up-front, outside world, all-comers sort of phenomenon. But we want the students also to have a secure working environment. ... I think the general anarchic nature of some of these Web 2.0 applications opportunities again is something we would want to expose the students to. If something went wrong, it would not be the end of the world, it might be vaguely embarrassing for them and us but they would learn something. And they would learn something important. (Face to face interview with C)

Temporality, technoliteracy and new subjectivities

As the quotation from Woocher (1977, p.503) above acknowledges, anti-structure finds primary expression in the phenomenon of liminality. An opposing perspective, however, would question whether the liminal or anti-structural space, the transformative threshold space and process in which (necessarily) troublesome knowledge is negotiated and conceptual difficulty encountered and overcome, is actually truncated or eroded by fast time and the 'consumptive' university it ushers in.

Print and digital cultures seem to favour distinctive temporalities. Whereas print culture and the cloistered academy required 'slow time' (Eriksen 2001) and private space to foster contemplation and deliberation, the digital would seem to thrive, in the main, on 'fast time', immediacy of response, and universal virtual space. Web 2.0 practices seem caught in an awkward tension, if not disjunction. The pedagogical claims made for them seem to be located within, and to require the integrative and deliberative logic of what Eriksen characterises as slow time. As digital phenomena, however, they increasingly serve to constitute fast time, can only accelerate in their future *modus operandi*, and reinforce the principle that fast time drives out and occupies the place of slow time.

The liminal state permits an integration of new knowledge into a new way of seeing, a re-conceptualisation. It is the state of trouble, stuckness, letting go and changed subjectivity, without which the possibility of things being otherwise is unlikely to come into view (Perkins 2006, Meyer and Land 2006). It is a transformative state that engages existing certainties and renders them problematic, and fluid. Such troublesomeness or disquietude, however, is purposeful, as it is the provoker of change that cannot be assimilated, and hence is the instigator of new learning and new ontological possibility. Is this 'squeezed' by fast digital temporality, or are the long hallowed academic prerequisites of slow time, reflection, tranquillity and solitude in (private) cloistered space merely residual factors of analogue print culture?

On the other hand, if learning is 'a change in subjectivity' (Pelletier 2007) do new forms of 'technoliteracy' (Kahn & Kellner 2005) produce new subjectivities? Will newly technoliterate students work and communicate differently in fast time, with no loss of quality, creativity or decision-making? The intensification of activity in digital environments was certainly experienced as troublesome by one of our student respondents:

I am very conscious of a buzzing brain, which is both a very positive thing but potentially worrying. I don't quite do what I set out to do but just go with the instinct – it's a difficult thing to explain and accounts for the occasional feeling that decisions are being made for me from somewhere within my brain. I'm alarmed by tales of people addicted to computer games to the extent that they are unable to move away and wonder if that's because they've set up some circuits that they can't break out of. My main point is that a change in the brain is something that happens with learning anyway – we don't want it to stop, but perhaps we want to continue to be able to control it. The Gary Larson cartoon about 'my brain's full' maybe isn't so silly! If our identities change with what we learn and the speed of processing is such that we can't actually control or even monitor how this happens, then perhaps we should be worried about what we might become. (Face to face interview with K)

Social media and distanciation

Finally, Giddens' concept of 'distanciation', the notion of our carrying around our social world with us, regardless of the time-space continuum, suggests that certain social media (Facebook being a prime example) permit learners to access existing higher education infrastructures, and their own private social worlds, simultaneously, as points of web presence, regardless of the geographical point of their embodied presence.

The structuring of time-space distanciation relies on such social relations as 'presence-availability' – the organization of presence, absence proximity and availability, and the degree of co-present activities in relation to 'tele-present' activities. (Giddens, 1984)

Our research encountered the notion that students in the digital age are 'never away' but permanently networked. This leads to the blurring of boundaries between social/informal and formal spaces and between public and private spaces. It is becoming commonplace, and increasingly accepted by teachers, for students to have laptops open and connected through wireless broadband throughout the working day, whether working privately or whether participating in large or small group settings such as lectures and seminars. Student familiarity with web 2.0 technologies, and their collaborative, user generated materials such as weblogs, tagging and filesharing, means that they are increasingly 'backchannelling' and multi-tasking electronically, recording, searching for information, sharing data and comments – even across the space of the lecture theatre or seminar room while formal teaching is in progress. This apparent digital 'unruliness' can be seen initially as transgressing the norms of conventional transmissive or didactic pedagogies and challenging the authority and control of the tutor in those settings. Increasingly, however, such practices are being acknowledged as likely to develop graduates capable of coping with complex flows of information, successfully prioritising and regulating their own behaviours and adopting critical informed views through access to multi-perspectival data. Such technologies are now integrated within inquiry-based and self-regulated learning which are congruent with and can help sustain effective research-led academic environments. Such practices, rather than being resisted in teaching, are being purposefully incorporated and successfully exploited. However a negative effect of distanciation (and fast time) is that the contemplative (research or private study) space becomes dis-placed by requirements for open office space and student learning centres to the domestic sphere, where it is invaded and compromised anew by the digital in the form of 24/7 domestic broadband connection.

I certainly don't feel I have much of a distinction between home and work any more, with both functioning in more or less the same way as portals into the internet where almost all my work is. I wonder if that is bad, or a healthy deconstruction of the work/home opposition into simply 'life'? (Face to face interview with S)

Conclusion

The caution or 'reining in' of the more radical propensities of these new media as we saw earlier, is perhaps inevitable and understandable (particularly in their early days of use). Despite the compromises and curtailment, however, it is encouraging to see universities engaging with these new spaces in what were nevertheless novel, productive and enjoyable ways. While a cautious approach to the more radical potential of these digital modes is noticeable, in its repurposing of social technologies it is encouraging to see the university beginning to acknowledge and engage with the radical potential which the new media represent. In its appropriating and repurposing of social technologies, higher education is perhaps beginning to acknowledge and adapt to the ontological state of speed, disquietude and radical uncertainty that the learners of the future must competently and critically navigate. In this way it may exploit the digital to discover new contemplative and creative spaces. Alternatively it might accommodate states of almost perpetual liminality, or, at least, quickly shifting provisional stabilities. Whichever way, it is unlikely that 21st century higher education can constrain indefinitely the implications for higher education infrastructure and practices occasioned by the digital turn

Social media continue therefore to ask us to engage with a new research agenda, to continue to work creatively with new pedagogies appropriate to these novel digital spaces, and to engage with some far-reaching challenges relating to the literacies and assessment practices we bring to bear when we take education online. Many questions remain. To what extent do the new media challenge our conventional understandings of the way in which knowledge is generated and disseminated within the academy, and to what extent do they challenge or mesh with the changing idea of the university in the age of the digital? Do students possess the forms of 'technoliteracy' (Kahn and Kelner 2005) required to manage and produce academic knowledge within such spaces? How can organisational frameworks devised for assessing conventionally-written assignments – currently operating through assessment regimes which remain largely locked in transmissive mode – be re-crafted for the open, collaborative, volatile textual spaces of the read/write web? What kinds of 'digital pedagogies' work in these spaces, and how are they perceived and experienced by students? Significant challenges remain for us as researchers, teachers and learners in a higher education increasingly informed by the digital.

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