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Social media and self-curatorship:
reflections on identity and pedagogy through blogging on a masters module

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Abstract

This paper reports on a case study of a small group of students who use an online module as part of a wider masters' programme, studying media, culture and communication. The students were invited to move beyond standard course evaluation strategies to theorize and reflect on their experiences of engaging with social media as both the medium and the subject of the course. The paper discusses the student experience as it unfolded in the context of an assessed piece of project work. In discussing the findings the authors locate the arguments in the context of debates about new literacies, pedagogy and social media as well as in an emergent theory of self-curatorship as a metaphorical frame for understanding the production and representation of identity in digital media.

Keywords

Social media, identity, pedagogy, literacy, blogging, innovative assessment, masters level, curatorship

1. Introduction

1.1 Social media, pedagogy and literacy

The rise of social networks such as Facebook and of social media activities such as blogging, photo and video sharing have been widely explored in literature which seeks to position them variously as socio-technical phenomena (Katz, 2006) as instances of youth media production (Barker, 2009; boyd, 2007) and as liberating and groundbreaking communicative activities worldwide, especially in the affluent networked societies of the developed world. For the most part, they use traditional methodologies drawn from socio-cultural theory, including the use of audience studies (adapted to incorporate the motion of audience as producer), large-scale surveys and smaller scale interviews. The studies also draw from an educational theory base. A raft of enthusiasts and evangelists for the potential of online social spaces have begun to write about their impact on education and rise of the user as author, peer learning, new participatory cultures and literacies (Duffy & Bruns, 2006; Jenkins, et.al, 2006; Rettberg, 2008; Williams & Jacobs, 2004).

According to some scholars, this is not an unproblematic endeavour, enmeshed as it is with an over celebration of technology of and for itself (Buckingham, 2007). Critics contend that too much of the literature that promotes social media's potential for education lacks the rigorous and overarching theoretical frame that is needed to explore and reconcile student practices with new media with educational practice. In an attempt to map out future directions for teaching and research in the field, this article attempts to explore the celebratory claims about the integration of new technology tools in educational environments. On one level, it is concerned with reporting the experiences of a small

group of students on a Masters degree in Media, Culture and Communication. On another level, the analysis of the student experiences and activities presents an opportunity to theorize and present potential research questions to guide further empirical research in social media and learning.

1.2 Exploring usable theories and frameworks

Participation, affinity and identity are common themes throughout the research literature about the context of social media and learning (Dahlgren, 2007; Gee, 2004; Ito et al., 2009) together with frameworks that allow us to see how "socialising" the various activities might be a useful construct for examining the phenomena (Crook, 2001). As Merchant (forthcoming, 2012) points out, the benefits of exploring those themes within formal educational settings too often end up being described rather than actually theorised. Thus, many studies report that young people are engaging with informally organised networks in ways which simply must have a means of mapping onto educational settings and systems, if only the systems were permeable and permissive and allowed for the simple integration of technological tools to think and interact with.

This is a major gap in thinking for at least two reasons. First, there is no easy way of bringing together the arguments made about identity and representation in socio-cultural theory (Goffman, 1990; Giddens, 1991) with those made in learning theory (Wenger, 1998) At best we can describe the sorts of dispositions and skills which learners appear to have by their activity in such spaces and turn to diverse networked theories of learning (Engeström, Miettinen, & Punamäki, 1999; Gee, 2004; Wenger, 1998) to allow us to discern mappings to educational practice. Second, educational experience is bound up in learner identity theory and is not always accounted for in discussions about the open and performative spaces of social media in informal spaces such as peer networks.

Two theoretical frames show promise as a way to bridge this gap. First, scholars have explored the way that social capital is obtained through the uses of social media by individuals and groups in much of the same way that that social capital is obtained in other social spaces (Hargitai, 2007). Second, theories of identity which are concerned with building on conceptions of performance (Goffman, 1990) and notions of ontological (in)security (Giddens, 1991) can be framed in the context of new literacies.

Thus, the usable and useful frameworks in this study are drawn from meta-level discussions of identity theory in combination with social capital and learning theory. In thinking about how learners represent themselves in digital media we also need to think more about how aspects of identity are played out in the context of educational systems, particularly assessment systems. If, as Merchant and others have asserted, digital media reveal the "anchored and transient" representations of the self as presented by learners (Merchant, 2005), what does this mean for education at all levels? In this regard, it becomes important to locate this study within the context of assertions about major changes to the status and organisation of the 'self' in new media.

1.3 Contexts: The module and the students

Internet Cultures, the module, on which students aged 20 – 50 were working in this study, was one option on a masters programme concerned with media, culture and communication. It was devised to join other production and critical theory modules in order to move the whole programme, and its students, forward into a more productive engagement with new social media forms. One of the key theoretical frames in the module, as noted above, was provided by Lievrouw and Livingstone (2006).

This enabled the students to approach the subject from three different perspectives. First, they could consider the artefacts or devices used to communicate or convey information and how these were changing. Second, they could look further at the practices in which people engage to share information. Finally, they could begin to question the 'newness' of the new social arrangements which evidently develop around these devices, tools and associated practices. In particular, they could examine both the enthusiastic claims for the uses of social media tools in education (Downes, 2004) and the more measured, reasoned and even sceptical accounts (Buckingham, 2007; Selwyn, 2010).

All students were expected to create and maintain a blog during the course, thus becoming the agents in the study and also the self-reflexive objects of the study. Students were asked to keep the blog at least during the 10 weeks of the module, with the aim, not of studying blogging as a form, so

much as using the blog as a vehicle with which to engage with the wider aspects of online social media, pedagogy and identity formation. At the end of that time, they were expected in written work to reflect on the process in the light of their experience, their posts and their exchanges with fellow students, tutors and comments from the wider Internet. They were also expected to write in the light of theoretical readings which were provided for them and/or which they located themselves.

The module design encompassed a mixed mode delivery. An all day face to face session at the start of the summer term set out the parameters for exploration, provided some initial theoretical input, and allowed students to start blogging. A similar day two thirds of the way through the module gathered thoughts developed so far from amongst all of the blogs, reviewed the main issues and set out how these were to be turned into assignments and critical, reflective accounts of experience. WordPress was used as the main vehicle for the blog creation, allowing students to make connections and to write in the simplest form possible. It was used in partnership with a Virtual Learning Environment to raise issues of troubleshooting to do with the course more generally as well as to present resources and activities week by week (Potter, 2008).

The subject matter for the blogs, which was self-chosen, ranged from political analysis in a specific sphere such as civic participation or critical pedagogy, personal diaries, hobbies and pastimes, through cultural experiences in diary form of living in London (a frequent subject for students from different countries) and academic treatises.

The student body on the Internet Cultures module fell into two distinct groups: teachers and non-teachers. As a result of this breadth of experience, expectations were differentiated. For students who were working as teachers and who wished to create a blog based on their professional life, the blog existed as a separate entity from their own written exchanges and reflections during the course which were located inside the course Virtual Learning Environment. For the rest of the students who were not teaching but working in media settings or studying, the blog itself was the main vehicle for both the practical task and the critical reflection. The following diagram represents the balance between practice and theory in the course:
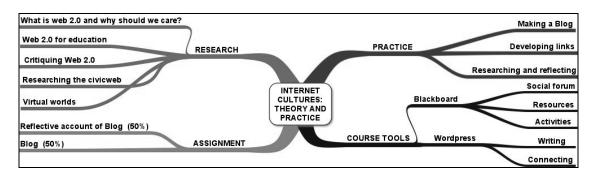

Figure 1: Map showing the elements of the module featured in the research

2. Material and methods

2.1 Research questions and methodology

There were three research questions, as follows:

1. To what extent does the experience of participating in social media activities in an academic capacity enable one simultaneously to explore and to research such spaces and activities?

2. In this context, what does it actually mean to learn and to be assessed in such spaces?

3. Finally, how do students mesh such potentially theoretically challenging experiences with their everyday experiences of culture, work, leisure and family life?

The case study approach suggested itself for two reasons. The first was to help develop an understanding of the setting at a sufficiently deep level to frame a meaningful interpretation of the texts produced by the bloggers in this instance. The second was to generate a small amount of rich data which give sufficient detail and depth to the close textual analysis of blog posts.

Interview questions were grouped to address the areas bounded by the research questions. We began with questions on the nature of identity and connectedness (Merchant, 2012). We moved on to ask in more detail about the self-revelatory aspects of the blog (Bauman, 2004; Giddens, 1991; Goffman, 1990). We then asked about the balance between critical theory and practice on the module before moving into issues of sustainability beyond the course itself into the lives of the learners.

2.2 Establishing the sample and informed consent

The work took place under the research guidelines of the British Educational Research Association, under informed consent and with guarantees of anonymity. Written consent to publish quotations was obtained from the six subjects who chose to volunteer for the study and all their names and their Wordpress IDs were anonymised.

3 Results

The six participants produced writing in the blogs with a range of topics and interests.

Student A wrote a highly personal, mainly text-based blog reflecting on her decision-making process around entering the teaching profession. Student B wrote a blog which moved between the cultural differences she experienced as a foreign student in London and the wider UK.   Student C described her blog as mainly being about being herself and "chatting". She lived in the far north of the UK and her blog was written in a personal diary form, documenting events in text and visual modes but simultaneously metaphorically looking over her shoulder at the assessment process. Student D used his blog as a means for reflecting on his PhD proposal looking at issues of critical pedagogy, embodiment and representation in online spaces. Student E was a creative practitioner and lecturer in art and drama. She created more than one blog, used as many of the technical features and widgets provided in the software as she possibly could. Her purpose in creating the blog in this way was to explore creative elements of production and experimentation as well as the boundaries of the technology in relation to offline and non-technological pedagogic practices. Student F engaged with the debates around youth and civic participation online with some posts concerned specifically with digital identities and youth media.

3.1 Feelings on academic blogging

The first group of attitudinal questions about academic blogging revealed a range of responses across the six students. Student A actively liked the idea of having the opportunity to blog as part of an academic course, forcing the pace, but not infringing on personal life and with no particular feelings of self-consciousness in evidence:

> "As it was a critiqued element of an academic course I was able to blog in a much more regular fashion than I have been able to in the past. It did not infringe on my personal life at all as it was, in effect, my work. I think we all blogged in our own manner, though my blog was perhaps more self-reflective and personal than most. "

For student F there was evident discomfort with the experience of being "out there" on the wider Internet which nevertheless was welcomed as a facet of identity construction. There was also tacit acknowledgement in the following quotation of feelings and representations potentially having wider effects amongst the group of bloggers…

> "I was very happy about having to blog, although there were many aspects about it that made me feel uncomfortable (I should probably clarify that I think "feeling uncomfortable" can be a good thing for learning!) Firstly, I didn't really want to write a personal blog about my life or "inner world". I have too much respect for any possible reader to want to put that kind of stuff out there, however, no offence meant for anyone who does write that kind of blog…"

Others essentialised the blogging experience, reporting that such representations and alignments were a facet of modern living; there was nothing unusual about the process in this respect, it was simply taking its place in the panoply of human activity which is connected with the reflexive project of the self (Giddens, 1991). On having to construct the self in published form in this way through the module, student B noted:

> "I did not have a problem with that. In our modern world we have to acquire an online identity in order to communicate with others…"

The idea that identity construction is part of co-construction and communication in social media was never far from responses in this first group. However, more than one felt that blogging was essentially "false" in the context of a course, knowing that the act of making the blog was being observed for the purposes of assessment, and that you were effectively confronting the integration of an additional level of performativity into your academic life.

3.2 Self revelation

Self-revelatory questions allowed for these themes to develop further. One of the students developed the argument about the false nature of the work, describing how blogging was about constructing an artifice for exhibition. It made him feel like he was talking to a reflection of himself, but in a public forum. He also made the claim that if he were not writing for the course the format would allow more spontaneity and that his style and voice would be different. Student F wrote:

> "I have said that I felt that in a way my blogging was 'false', or perhaps 'artificial', how can I explain? I knew I was doing it for a course, so especially at the start it felt a bit like talking to myself in the mirror.... I guess that had I started a blog spontaneously, the blog would have been about something else, something I'm passionate about probably, and my style/voice would be different. For the course, I knew I was being 'observed'; if doing it spontaneously I would of course have my imagined audience, perhaps some friends I would tell about my blog, so it would have felt different I'm sure."

Again the sense of falsehood and lack of spontaneity is located as being down to observation, a condition in which the blog writer continually exists, where self revelation is skewed in some way by the purposes of the blog and by the perceived nature of the observation and the observers.

There was a general consensus, however, among the volunteers, that it was possible to keep the roles and relationships in their right place and actively to enjoy the balancing act through the process. As student C wrote:

> "I found the whole thing great fun. Once I had started I tried to keep up with blogging regularly. I tried to blog as me - semi personal, but on a course"

Student E felt that the act of self-revelation did not provide the cogency, focus or clarity that she required of herself academically, and produced levels of dissatisfaction with her blog. She took it through many changes. She also began to explore modes of representation which went beyond text into audio and video, in ways in which others did not. She was by far the most experimental of the participants, deleting, changing and moving whole blogs and content in a restless pursuit of self-revelation and bettering of artistic and pedagogic practice. She alluded during this time to the influence of the timing of the course. She wrote:

> "The first few blogs were a lot about me and exploring the blog arena but once I had attended the first residential that changed. I decided the blog needed a focus and a meaning. We have such a short time on these modules that I feel we need to focus very much on getting as much out of them as possible. I also feel I am not a great writer; there were some blogs that had great simple words and thoughts but that did not work for me. That does not mean that I did not go searching for a blog that would be very personal to me, it was just expressed in a very visual way."

3.3 Theory v practice balance across the module

In at least one case we found that engagement of the kind available in the module had provoked and stimulated thought about what it meant to be critical and reflective at a deeper level; student F wrote as follows:

> "On the question of being critical … I feel that "critical" is such an overused word and covers so many different positions and ideologies that it becomes an "empty signifier" … it can be adopted by anyone to mean anything. I certainly felt the space to be critical (according to my own understanding of the word) and I think that is reflected in my blog and course assignment…I expect that if I do a PhD, I might blog in order to help me engage with theory…"

Here there is less apparent concern with the substance and more with the process; this particular student was using the form as a way of writing his way through to more substantial thought; blogging not specifically as reflective tool so much as a method to get into deeper level of engagements in other academic arenas.

Student E expressed the view that there should have been more theoretical input and more opportunity to look more widely at non-blog-based Internet cultures…

> "I think the blog can be as critical as the individual student wants it to be. Personally, I would have benefited from more theory on the course and more forms of theory regarding non-blogged based Internet cultures. "

Here we see an argument based on the currency of the form and its connection or disconnection with other social spaces on the Internet, such as virtual worlds and other social networks.

Student C worried that her exploration had not been at a sufficient critical depth but that there was so much work to be done in the whole field of blogging and education, not least to theorise the relationship to literacy practices (of which more below in section 4…). She wrote:

> "I spent so long exploring I don't think I was that critical. For me there is so much more work to do in this area that I need to go back and review the work. I do think that some of the issues were behind the work in blogging in Education that is happening. Because it is so literacy based there is a lot of work to be done on the future uses and possibilities."

3.4 Impacting on practice in social media and pedagogy

Turning to the influence of the course on activity and identity afterwards, the response from most students was generally positive about the impact on life outside the confines of the module. Student E reported a huge success in taking her blog out into a formal educational setting. The key for her seemed with which different modalities could be combined in the process, with the key elements of collection and distribution as the most useful properties of the medium. She wrote…

> "All my group now have media blogs and all the work goes onto their blog. It has changed the classroom…for visual students they can display work without literacy problems and it looks so professional."

Student F pointed out that he wanted to use the blog in future dissertation writing, calling it an "intentional new practice". He said that the experience showed how a blog could be powerful and effective as a place in which to collect a repository of ideas explore them in a form of research journal and also crucially collect feedback from readers.

> "My first blog was specifically set up with the ultimate objective of providing me with an online resource to help me define ideas and reflect in preparation for the dissertation. So it was an intentional new practice, one which I intend to continue using throughout the dissertation research / writing period. The experience has also showed me how powerful and effective a blog can be as a mix of research journal / repository of ideas / feedback collection tool."

4. Discussion

Blogging is not a new medium and its history is traceable back to the earliest days of the Internet (Rettberg, 2008). However, its position in the panoply of social media, as a relatively slow and reflective tool, with a degree of end-user control over its modalities and functions, lends itself to academic and educational exploration. Certainly in this module it was a means to explore Internet cultures without engaging principally with issues of privacy and ownership in social networking sites, their content and other ethical issues. These spaces were never far from the students' minds in terms of comparisons, but the blog afforded some quasi-personal distance from the day-to-day presentation and the slower rendering visible of some of the processes of identity construction.

4.1 Identity construction as literacy practice

The students saw the blog as a space in which they presented and represented aspects of themselves within a performative context. In this they were taking part in the cultural practices of representation which exist both inside and outside the formal structures of the course. Since the multiliteracies debates (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000) the wider definitions of literacy, such as those offered by Brian Street (1985) have served to underline a view of how cultural practices are also literacy practices. The students were being asked to problematise what they experienced as participants in lived culture whilst they simultaneously created content and re-making their identity in a shared, observed space.

In a sense this is nothing new but, following some of the comments from the students themselves, we could argue that this process has engendered what a great many instances of new technologies do, that is, they make visible certain processes and practices which were previously invisible. Thus the blogs in the module, to an extent like social networking sites, were revelatory, not in the sense that they were fostering inherently new processes so much as rendering them newly visible. There is a difference because in the former, the case can be made by enthusiasts and evangelists alike of the essentialism of the technology to the process. In the latter case, the emphasis is on the everyday lived experience of culture amongst the participants with the blog as a catalyst.

4.2 The blog as a form of social media

Blogging itself is the form in which we have used it is not the most common use of social media on the Internet. The intention was never to portray it or attempt to sell it to the students as such. Indeed, as we have seen, our students reminded us in some of their responses that we needed to find ways of exploring the wider experience of life online, including other forms of social networking. We have always discussed these and maintain them as key aspects of personal research and commentary during the course but we acknowledge that we need to amplify that the blog is only the medium and need not be the form under investigation itself.

Blogging allows different modes to become available to be combined to make meaning but it is uncertain how we account for them fully and this tension goes to the heart of the integration of new literacy practices in a system which is essentially based in old literacy practices. Perhaps the only way to do this is to expand our notions of what is considered to be literacy practice in new media, a debate which a number of academics are now engaged in, trying to locate a way to reconcile semiotics and cultural studies, the multimodal texts and the world in which the texts arise (Burn, 2009).

4.3 Collection, distribution and exhibition

Elsewhere there is a growing acknowledgement that the management of the versions of the self in social media is a key skill in late modernity and that this process is also about how this version of the self connects with others, participates in networks and makes sense in a variety of contexts (Wenger, 1998). In some forms of new media production this is characterised as metaphorical process of curatorship (Potter, 2010). This is not the process we know as collection management in museums and archives so much as the collection, distribution and exhibition management of the self across social media. There is no sense in these literacy activities that the self is ever completely "finished" even, as in the case of these students, at the point of assessment.

4.3 Social media and pedagogy: belonging and criticality in performative space

The process of engaging with social media took the students into a (mostly) productive engagement with words, images, sounds and making connections. Engagement is sometimes celebrated in contemporary media studies literature as an end in itself (Downes, 2004). As Esther Hargittai has suggested, 'the membership of certain online communities mirrors people's social networks in their everyday lives; thus online actions and interactions cannot be seen as *tabula rasa* activities, independent of existing offline identities' (2008, p. 293). This was played out for and by our students in their expectations of comments from peers or students, their re-framing of their own identities, their anxieties around assessment and the production of a blog as part of an academic exercise, however the rules of the game were far from static. The notion that requiring a blog as part of an academic assessment might be less challenging than writing a traditional academic essay turned out to be quite misplaced in that most of our students were more comfortable and experienced in traditional academic formats than they were in the reflection-made-public mode required by the blog format. It requires further study to make sense of how learner and teacher identity plays out in an era in which self-curatorship is a key skill and disposition in new media. For some, certainly not all, young people, this fluid and multifaceted representational world is something they recognise as a cultural practice and as a literacy practice that they are engaging with inside and outside the classroom. It is likely that future pedagogy will need to build on the skills and dispositions of intergenerational groups in social media not least to connect with the need to develop criticality in performative space (Banaji, 2011).

Finally, future research should consider how we reconcile the tensions which emerge. We could perhaps start by investigating the links to the wider, productive culture in which the module resides, not least in how we can conduct more longitudinal research in the field which sees us investigate the notion of curatorship in new media more fully.

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