

Theme: The Digital University and new learning technologies (DU)

Curating Knowledge Exchange: Let Us Mess About

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Abstract

This paper explores the potential for curation to offer a productive metaphor for the convergence of digitally mediated learning across and between home / lifeworld and formal educational / systemworld spaces – or across the public and private spheres. In so doing, we propose a model in progress that can more profoundly refashion higher education provision, beyond mere utilisation of ‘the digital’ towards a reconstruction of knowledge and of ‘the expert’. We see students’ ‘needs and expectations’ in this light.

We draw conclusions from our interdisciplinary research to argue that the acceptance of transmedia literacy practices as a cite for rich educational work between and across all disciplines cannot be harnessed by MOOCs or blended arrangements of on and offline learning alone. Rather, these new affordances of genuine ‘knowledge exchange’ can only be grasped if matched by a convergence of a more *porous* educator-student expertise.

Curatorship and higher education

The rise and rise of the term “curated” to describe the activities of “owners” of social media spaces, blogs and wikis, and the composers of shared music, film and animations, appears to reflect an agentive turn to meta-authorship amongst larger numbers of participants in online media. The way in which digital texts and artefacts combine to make meaning represents the new cultural and literacy practice of curatorship (Potter, 2012), in and through which a new formulation of knowledge is exchanged between experts who are always ‘in progress’.

In writing this we are conscious of the fact that our discipline, media, usually positioned as the upstart outsider by the dominant ecology of higher education in the UK, must now be seen as a rich site for subjectivity and identification and moved towards the centre ground of the struggle to locate for education those cultural values which lie outside traditionally prescribed curricula. The imperative for this does not arise from a techno-evangelism, nor from a simple equation of new digital practices with autonomous models, instantly conferring motivation, happiness and qualifications on a grateful mass of students. Rather, the imperative lies in realizing what could be achieved by building a bridge between those skills and dispositions across all of the disciplines, and between them.

John Clarke (2014), reflecting on the extraordinary ‘disproportionate effects’ of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies’ impact across disciplines, identified two conditions for this possibility. First, students and teachers co-produced material as the orthodoxy (as the CCCS50 archive itself curates). Secondly, the centre always worked across disciplines, or, in Clarke’s words “*they let us mess about*”. Working across and between disciplines, with students as partners, and across and between the university and the digital ‘out there’ will constitute such productive frivolity, we suggest.

The difference that “digital” brings for those in the developed world for those who have the social and economic capital to take part is an almost immediate access to authorship and validation from a wider mass of people, sometimes even within a community of practice (Wenger, 1998)).

Our research asked - how can higher education respond to these opportunities? And how do we know?

From the findings, we propose three recommendations for curating learning in the digital age with adherence to some enduring (but as yet elusive) Vygotskian (1978) principles:

(1) Knowing that practices, resources and artefacts of lived experience are not easily transmissible across the membrane between inside and outside the university, educators need to focus instead on the skills and dispositions evident in the one which can support and develop the other. From outside, the tactics and strategies of managing multiple presences, anchored and transient affiliations (Merchant, 2005) in a dynamic and seemingly always-visible space; from university, in the other direction, a criticality and distance provided, in the best of these settings, in a moderated place of safety which seeks to work with the habitus and cultural capital of students. Chris Richards observed the challenges for any education posed by the constraints of broader pedagogic power structures, as inevitably “*Teaching takes place within conditions which are not of its own choosing and its power to intervene in the formation of others, though considerable, is itself historically variable and limited*”.

(1990: 167-8). Two decades on, in the digital age, the profoundly artificial 'in between' space of education should become the explicit focus of pedagogy as opposed to an 'inconvenient truth'. This will look like a kind of ethnography of mediation across boundaries, rather than the hegemonic intervention in (textual) subjectivity enacted only on the terms of educators exercising power. We argue that any notion of the 'digital university' asserts the latter.

(2) Making self-representational texts involves organizing and re-ordering on and offline, analogue and digital textual practices – acts of assemblage. These are not a given, in some kind of digital native utopia. Instead, in this sense, 'knowledge production' moves away from either confirming or challenging the conventions of 'real' academic work from 'the academy' and becomes an auto-ethnographic making of textual meaning and, ultimately, of knowledge (of the self). The nature of educational space as an 'in between' habitus becomes itself the object of study, fostering genuine 'proximal development' of criticality.

(3) Establishing circles of trust in which students have a voice which exercises some control over the digital spaces available to them inside the programme. Voice (Fielding, 2014) is far from neutral, however. We are, here, articulating Couldry's (2010) conception of the sociology of voice as providing a space for "the conditions under which we can give accounts of our lives and to how these accounts are valued, or perhaps not valued at all (2010: 113)." We suggest that higher education has paid insufficient attention to the pedagogic framing of the (textualised) lives of students. Curation is profoundly to do with this kind of textual accounting.

In practice, this means genuine knowledge exchange between teacher and student, students as genuine partners. If the boundaries between technology / user, text / reader, digital platform / audience are to be curated as fluid and unstable, then so to must the boundaries between being a teacher and being a student, being an expert or 'lacking' the capacity to be so. So finally, the design of higher education pedagogy (our 'making' of learning – Orr and McDougall, 2014) must shift to make the 'educational encounter' match the proliferation of deconstructed, fragmented transmedia reading and making practices in the lifeworlds of our students. Put simply, our curation pedagogy embraces the status of the inexperienced educator – from Ranciere's 'ignorant schoolmaster' (2009). Going further, we want to mirror transmedia with a pedagogy of blended expertise, so that knowledge and authority – the mantle of the expert – also travel along the membrane between the university and, as Stuart Hall had it "out there" (Johnson, 2014). A pedagogy framed as curation can help return us to these old questions with a renewal of aspiration, but only with a radical 'reboot' of how we design learning as trans-disciplinary and digitally mediated, towards a porous expertise.

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