

## **C10.1 Denbigh 1 Wednesday 5 December 14.15 - 16.16**

### ***Examining student digital literacies through epistemologies of ignorance (0392)***

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#### **Abstract**

This paper examines student digital literacy in Higher Education and how it relates to the philosophical study of ignorance. It argues that a social practice approach to digital literacy can help examine how epistemologies of ignorance may be sustained through students' practices of digital literacy. Much has been written recently about how to educate students to be critically aware of how misinformation is circulated in online spaces, and how information discernment is a vital skill for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. These are now considered key issues with which theorists of digital and informational literacy should contend. Using data from a study which explores the knowledge producing work of undergraduate students, we will argue that the challenge for Higher Education is to understand how particular forms of digital literacy practices pave the way for the construction of ignorance, and that such inquiry is a first step in developing approaches to counter it.

#### ***Introduction & background***

This paper is based on a research project that examines the characteristic features of the digital literacy of undergraduate students at two contrasting universities in a major UK city. We present some preliminary findings on how students search for information online for their assignments, how they discern the quality of that information, and the extent to which they rely on their lecturers' judgements and decisions about what is acceptable, credible, and relevant. The internet, in the guise of Google, is regarded as a credible and efficient source of information, though the justification for such belief is being increasingly challenged. Examining student digital literacy through epistemologies of ignorance, we argue, alerts us to how the literate activity of students in digital environments is supported and shaped by 'sponsors' of digital literacy who, through their digital platforms and technologies, offer users opportunities to gain knowledge, and the potential to skew, suppress or distort it.

Academics often warn their students about the quality and veracity of information they obtain from the internet. Students are often told to undertake rigorous searches in subject-specific repositories and to rely on refereed literature, rather than trust more accessible treatments of a topic available in Wikipedia or in alluring YouTube videos, both of which will likely appear at the top of a student's search results. Yet how university students actually go about writing their assignments, and how they seek out and discern information, remains remarkably under-explored. This is a matter

of growing importance within the fields of academic practice and digital literacy more generally, but has not, hitherto, been examined as one combined problem. As universities increasingly, and with great enthusiasm, adopt and apply digital literacy policies and frameworks, little consideration is given to how students seek information and its discern quality in their written work.

Drawing from a 'social practice' approach to literacy (see Street 1984), this study examines digital literacies as "the constantly changing practices through which people make traceable meanings using digital technologies" (Gillen & Barton 2010 :1). Notably, this approach to digital literacy does not assume a deterministic and predictive relationship between digital media and students' writing and study practices. Instead, a social practice approach to digital literacy begins with detailed exploration of digital literacy in the lives of those who use technologies.

### ***Methods***

The research is situated across different disciplinary sites (Medicine, Computer Sciences, Arts and Humanities, and Business subjects) each within two universities that are subject to very different organisational and managerial cultures: a 'red brick' and a 'plate glass' university respectively.

Methods of data collection aimed to empirically capture the diversity and richness of digital literacy practices through a combination of:

- i) Focussed interviews of the participants' history of use with digital media over the course of their life, and how their confidence and practice with digital media and writing have evolved over time.
- ii) Screen recordings of students' laptops as they carried out their assignment work. This recorded the iterative processes of writing and is a method that is substantiated in other research into digital literacy and writing (see Bhatt 2017).
- iii) Analytic logs to gain insights into the apps that students used whilst writing their assignments.

### ***Findings & discussion***

For the purposes of this paper, we will focus specifically on those features which relate to how the students searched for information online while writing their assignment tasks, how they discerned the quality of that information, and the extent to which they were reliant on their lecturers' judgements and decisions about what is acceptable and credible for their work.

The cases offer interesting insights into the varied and unpredictable digital literacies of undergraduate work. Students differed substantially in the way that they searched for, managed and

discerned information they encountered. For example, some only followed the detailed guidance specified by their lecturers and were careful to produce work which only draws from the resources provided as part of course materials. When they felt the need to search for information beyond what was provided, they tended to rely on search results that appear in multiple results as a criterion of authority.

Others, in contrast to the above, cast a much smaller net in their searches for information, and were more confident about ‘filling in the missing pieces’ from lecture notes. These students relied more on self-discovery, with information filtered through their *own* assessments of its importance and credibility. For others, the lecturers seemed to be the ultimate authority and source of trust.

These, and numerous similar observations, point to the conclusion that some students’ writing practices were *ritualised*—that is, motivated mainly by a need to adhere to the rules of the game. Ritualisation directs the learning and discovery process and has the potential to restrict research practices because of the high level of epistemic trust in lecturers, rather than students trusting in their own abilities. This can constrain and restrict students’ practices of information gathering and discernment, and will likely situate their knowledge creation work. But can/should we expect anything more from undergraduate students? Would expecting otherwise result in cognitive overload? Ritualisation is an essential part of inducting the student into forms of knowledge creation necessary within a given discipline. It is itself a form of strategic ignorance, and helps situate the student’s literacy practices as a novice within the discipline. But it can also create a propensity to be unreflective and habituated in their online research practices.

Examining student digital literacy through epistemologies of ignorance alerts us to how the literate activity of students in digital environments is supported and shaped by powerful historical, social, and economic forces, or ‘sponsors’ of digital literacy. How students make use of the opportunities afforded to them, and how they come to make sense (or not) of the constraints upon them is a challenge facing educators. This kind of analysis helps us nuance common approaches to student digital literacy in Higher Education, pointing to the need to factor into our discussions issues of discernment and credibility judgements, and the ways these express and are expressed by individuated digital literacies.

## References

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