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New economies of student engagement using a digital curation learning-cycle

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Abstract: Hallett & Grindle poster proposal summary.docx

New economies of student engagement using a digital curation learning-cycle

Summary

Working from the argument that students now read and research in ways that privilege assembly, visualisation and interconnection, we propose that creativity can be mobilised by concentrating on a particular trope of learning and assembly. That trope is 'curation' and we propose a 'curation learning-cycle' that shows how this approach and activity might be used to enhance student learning, creativity and ownership. Exploring particular theories of curation, 'bricolage' and collaborative assembly, our poster explains how these are directly relevant to today's patterns and habits of student scholarship. Our learning cycle deliberately uses the language of franchise, investment, dividend, and legacy. At a time of disquiet about the colonisation of higher education by a 'neoliberal' language of learning gain, added value and the metrics of consumer satisfaction, our use of economic metaphors is pointedly self-conscious. By deploying ideas of ownership, investment, outputs, dividends and legacy, we hope we are helping to make the collective learning (and not commercial) value of curation activity clearer to all.

Paper:

Hallett & Grindle poster proposal paper.docx

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Paper

Working from the argument that students now read and research in ways that privilege assembly, visualisation and interconnection, we propose that creativity can be mobilised by concentrating on a particular trope of learning and assembly. That trope is 'curation' and we propose a 'curation learning-cycle' that shows how this approach and activity might be used to enhance student learning, creativity and ownership. Exploring particular theories of curation, 'bricolage' and collaborative assembly, our poster explains how these are directly relevant to today's patterns and habits of student scholarship.

Curating is an exceptionally powerful way to engage students. "It forces you to commit to your work", asserts one PhD student, recalling Perry's placement of 'commitment' as the pinnacle of intellectual and ethical development (Perry 1970). More recent studies suggest that curation can be more effective as a means to engage students in processes of assessment and feedback than almost any other activity (McDowell et al 2006).

During the last 20 years, a sub-genre of educational and cultural scholarship has emerged on the impact and potential of 'digital curation', which we (following the HEA) will define as 'a creative process; the bringing together of a tapestry of digital artefacts to construct new meaning or provide alternative perspectives' (HEA 2017). In his seminal work on constructionist learning, *Mindstorms: Children, Computers, and Powerful Ideas*, Papert celebrates an external facing and curatorial form of learning when he argues that:

the construction that takes place 'in the head' often happens especially felicitously when it is supported by construction of a more public sort 'in the world' [that] can be shown, discussed, examined, probed, and admired. It is out there. (Papert 1993, 142).

Recent interest in the power of online curation has also emerged from scholarship that focuses on digital behaviours and literacies: student habits of online study, reading and knowledge production (Papson 2014, Brown 2015). It is this set of 'curatorial' learning activities, or 'bricolage', that we wish to investigate more fully.

To distil our arguments, we propose the following 'curation learning cycle', suggesting that it can be used to nurture a heightened economy of student ownership, co-production and legacy. Whilst we are primarily interested in digital curation, we have retained the more general term so that the taxonomy can have wider application to tangible forms of curation:

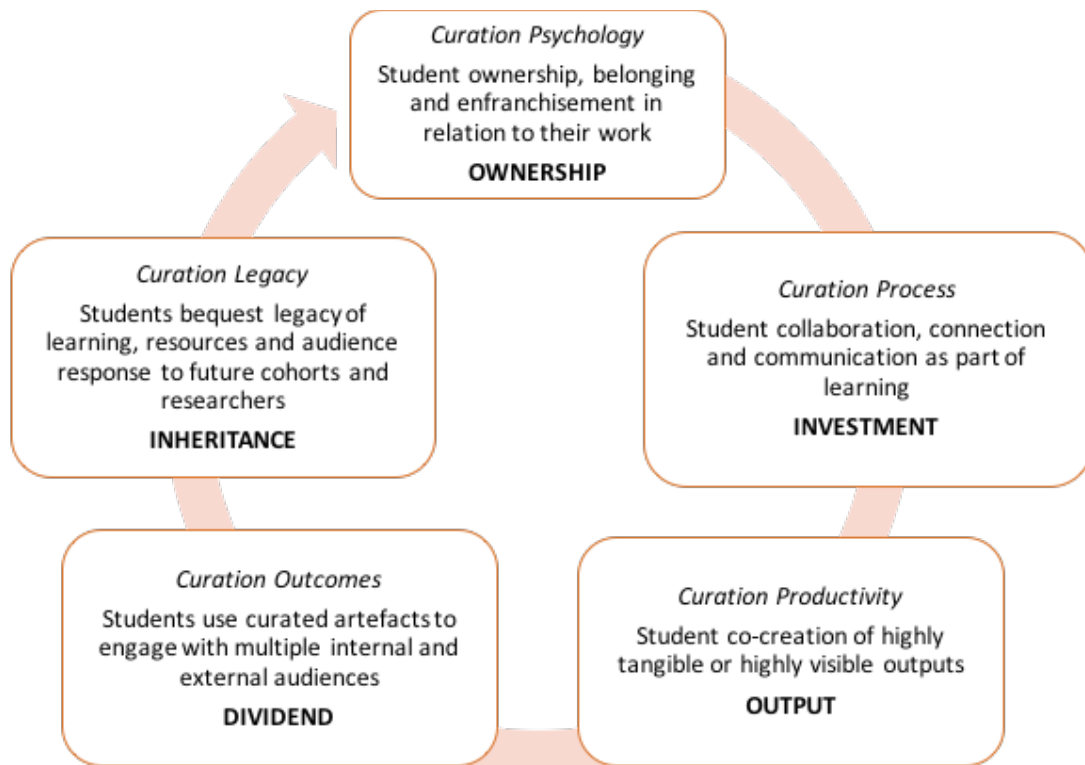


Fig. 1: Hallett & Grindle curation learning-cycle

Curation at each level, we claim, fosters student ownership (stage 1) because it allows students to conceive of a subject, a space and a set of resources (whether digital, physical or blended) as theirs.

Ownership is a crucial issue because a condition of successful engagement has to be that the students feel enfranchised (stage 1) as part of their learning. Curating offers a greater degree of ongoing ownership, since by allowing students to shape, process and repackage their work, it creates precisely the right conditions for students to invest (stage 2) in their work. Cook-Sather et al note that ‘research consistently demonstrates that students will work hard and engage deeply [we would say ‘invest’] when they experience learning as personally meaningful’ (Cook-Sather et al 2014, 11). This is a much more positive and creative way of conceiving student engagement than thinking about it solely in terms of effort and ‘time on task’ (Gibbs 2010, 23).

The powerful presence of curation outputs (stage 3) means that students work towards them with greater investment and commitment. A significant point here is that outward-facing activities, where students produce artefacts for audiences other than their tutor, not only afford greater opportunities

for investment, but also offer greater dividends (stage 4) than many traditional kinds of learning activity and assessment (Fung 2017).

Finally, learners invest more (intellectually, academically and emotionally) in learning outputs that have a legacy or bequest (stage 5) and a visible value beyond the 'closed or restricted economy' of the university, and beyond the conventional assessment types that colonise it. For the hours of intellectual labour they put in, students now want something they can curate and showcase (stages 4 and 5) to different audiences, and take away after they graduate. But this is not all. Legacy is 'something left over from a previous era but still in active existence' (OED). Artefacts bequeathed by one generation can be developed further by the educator as a form of learning inheritance (stage 5), offering a powerful feedback loop to inspire engagement and confidence within subsequent student cohorts.

At a time of disquiet about the colonisation of higher education by a 'neoliberal' language of learning gain, added value and the metrics of consumer satisfaction, our use of economic metaphors is pointedly self-conscious. By deploying ideas of ownership, investment, outputs, dividends and legacy, we hope we are helping to make the collective learning (and not commercial) value of curation activity clearer to our readers.

Perhaps more importantly, we also hope that we are shifting the use of this economic rhetoric in a new direction. Properly described as an unrestricted and de-centred economy of co-production, student-led curation places the ownership and legacy of learning firmly in the hands of the learners themselves. It demonstrates how value accrues to co-operative endeavours over time, more so than to individual enterprise. In doing so, the pedagogy of curation, we argue, liberates students' work from those assessment practices and learning spaces that might be seen to appropriate, divest or de-value it.

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