

Future literacies: authoring the posthuman text?

Lesley Gourlay, Institute of Education

One of the most profound changes undergone by contemporary society in recent years has been the exponential increase in the day-to-day use of networking technologies and digitally mediated communication, in social life and professional practice. Through ubiquitous technologies such as the internet, and increasingly mobile networked technologies, people are increasingly interconnected, and are accessing media which allow them to explore new forms of meaning-making in multimodal, dispersed and intertextual formats. Increasingly, these changes are felt within higher education as arguably 'e-learning' moves away from the margins; and the university as a social, cultural, political and physical space becomes increasingly permeated with digital mediation and the practices of social networking and interconnectivity. This has profound implications for educational practice across a range of areas.

This theoretical paper will focus on the ramifications of these changes for the future in one area in particular: authorship and the academic text in the digital age. It will examine in particular how the primacy of print literacy as the predominant form of expression and medium for argument and critique is being called into question, as new forms of expression become mainstream in society as a whole. In particular it will interrogate the seemingly stable categories of 'author', 'text' and 'reader', drawing on two theoretical sources from outside educational theory: posthumanism (e.g. Hayles 1999) and media theory (e.g. Kittler 2004), exploring these perspectives and what they can offer us as alternative means of understanding the fundamentally hybrid nature of contemporary and future academic writing, the tensions inherent in the struggle between analogue tradition surrounding text as product, and the messy, largely unobserved and unregulated digital practices of authors writing in the academy.

This complex, blurred area has already begun to destabilise some of the most cherished values of the traditional, pre-networked university - such as the unproblematic existence of a stable, singular writing subject. In this paper I will argue that this concept is being put under increasing pressure in terms of writing process, as a result of the fundamentally unstable, ephemeral, 'flickering' nature of digital texts and the internet itself. In a related point, the role and subjectivity of the reader is also shifting, as hypertext and social networking applications transform what it means to read and to interact with texts online (e.g. Carr: 2010). As a result, the academic writer finds herself engaged in a highly complex process of reading, sorting and composing in an overwhelmingly digital context, surrounded by a bewildering array of texts and messages across a range of platforms, and permeated by social networking and other forms of digital engagement. Writing as a process - it is argued - its taking place in contexts which are increasingly digital, messy, distributed, interconnected and unstable. However, the author is still expected to produce a text as finished product which appears to have been produced in an pre-networked age. Whether authored by students or researchers, the route to the production of this text is an increasingly distributed, multivocal and hybrid process forced to masquerade as an analogue artefact - a single voice producing a linear text from within the traditions of print literacies. A posthuman reading of these volatile arenas of representational practice in the academy will be proposed as offering us a positive, future-facing perspective on an area of education practice which is often associated with transgression, decline and moral panic discourses.

I will illustrate this argument with a consideration of the issue of authorship and ‘plagiarism’ in particular - a transgressive writing practice which has generated intense moral panic within higher education circles (Clegg & Flint 2006). In doing so I will apply Actor-Network-Theory (e.g. Latour 2005) as a perspective on social practice explicitly related to media and posthuman theory in its recognition of the agency of nonhuman actors. This perspective will be deployed in an exploration of the phenomenon of student plagiarism, challenging taken-for-granted notions of texts, ownership, authorship and the singular and stable writing subject in educational process. It will conclude that the (widening) disjuncture between academic writing as process and product - lying as it does on a social, political and historical ‘fault line’ between the analogue and digital in the contemporary university media system – is predisposing students to engage in ‘plagiarism’ as a response to the deluge of texts they encounter, and the fundamentally implicit nature of the guidance around the production and voicing of the final text – which belongs to the pre-digital age.

The session will conclude with suggested research directions in order to explore these themes, arguing that higher education studies should embrace perspectives, theories and methodologies from neighbouring disciplines such as Cultural Studies and Media Theory in order to more adequately theorise these profound changes to social and educational practice which are likely to characterise the universities of the near future. I will also offer some speculative thoughts on implications for pedagogic practice, in particular looking at the implications for the future in terms of the range of semiotic resources we allow students to deploy in the construction of academic argument, and the extent to which academic writing might in the future focus more on process of learning and knowledge construction in playful, ironic interplay with a wider range of media, thus also bringing into being a wider range of identities / subjectivities through a multivocal writing ‘voice’ (Bakhtin 1986).

References

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