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## Digital academic literacies as posthuman *apparatus*.

Contemporary academic writing and the related concept of ‘digital literacies’ are theorised in a range of ways in Higher Education research, policy and practice, leading to a situation where the day-to-day practices of reading and writing may become lost from view. Arguably, there has been a tendency in mainstream policy development to collapse back to a generic ‘skills and competencies’ model, underscoring the notion of the free-floating individual as both repository and sole agential source of literacy practices. Alongside this, there is a somewhat contradictory ‘brave new world’ discourse which imagines the ‘digitally literate’ student or graduate as a free-floating subject able to ‘harness’ the potential of the digital for learning and future employment. Although both of these framings may reflect some aspects of digital literacies, the nature of embodied and emergent day-to-day practice is arguably ‘tidied up’ by both, resulting in a strongly humanist model which regards devices and artefacts of inscription as ‘tools’ at the command of the idealised ‘user’. It also works to elide the specifics of social setting, temporality and spatiality, all of which are rendered as neutral backcloths to engagement. In this presentation, I will explore these tensions, and draw out the effects that flow from these overly-abstract and ideologically-freighted humanist assumptions about the nature of texts, devices, the writer and the notion of authorship. I trace a series of moves in the literature, moving from a rejection of humanist abstraction towards a posthuman framing. In doing so I review the contributions and ongoing diffractive potentials of New Literacy Studies in relation to this issue (e.g. Lea & Street 1998, Gillen & Barton 2010), Actor-Network Theory (e.g. Latour 2005, Clarke 2002,

Gourlay, Hamilton and Lea 2014), and theoretical challenges to the notion of spatiality (e.g. Massey 2005) and temporality (e.g. Lemke 2000, Grosz 2004) as 'context' to practice.

Turning to the work of Karen Barad, I consider the construct of the *apparatus* in particular, and the extent to which it may allow us to advance this theoretical move more coherently, towards a more nuanced recognition of the relationships between matter and meaning-making in the university. Student academic writing arguably tends to be focused on in mainstream Higher Education policy circles when there is a perception of deficit, specifically when it is felt that writing needs to be developed or enhanced. This is useful as a starting point, as these perceived deficits and how they have been differentially accounted for and addressed have led to various related theorisations of student writing and a range of associated structures and staff roles in universities, aimed at addressing the issue. Arguably, these framings situate writing in various ways as unproblematically residing in the human, the cognitive, and in particular within the individual student. However, I propose that their strongly humanist theoretical underpinnings create a range of effects in epistemological and ontological terms, effects which may limit and distort how we see knowledge, texts, meaning-making and students themselves. I will argue that the notion of 'digital literacy' recognises interaction with digital devices and interfaces, but the discourse surrounding these entanglements tends to position the device as 'tool' and the text as 'resource'. The 'user' again tends to be imbued with all the agency, although this can be complicated by contrasting this with the - at times dystopian - technodeterminist discourses which arguably exaggerate the agency of the digital and its potential to 'take over' from the human.

Although some frameworks of digital literacy focus on practice, this tend to be itemised into discrete 'skills' and rarely discussed in terms of their material instantiation. In her compelling and wide-ranging work 'Meeting the Universe Halfway', Karen Barad mounts a challenge to

the assumptions of social constructivism in general and representationalism and mediation via language in particular, which she argues evinces a ‘...distrust of matter’ (Barad 2007: 132). She proposes ‘a posthumanist performative approach to understanding technoscientific and other naturalcultural practices that specifically acknowledges and takes account of matter’s dynamism’ (Barad 2007: 135) with a focus on ‘matters of practices, doings and actions’ (ibid). In doing so, she rejects the assumption of independent objects as the primary ontological unit of analysis, instead proposing *phenomena* as ‘*the ontological inseparability/entanglement of intra-acting “agencies”*’ (Barad 2007: 139). The concept of *phenomena* seems to encapsulate the ideas explored above, and as such I will propose that it can be usefully applied to writing in the digital university, allowing us with one concept to take account of the various agencies described above. I will go on to explore one of Barad’s other key concepts in relation to writing as not only a set of intra-agential practices, but also as a technology of enquiry and meaning-making in itself – the notion of the *apparatus*, with reference to experimental work and practices in Quantum Physics. I apply this construct to academic writing as a posthuman assemblage/entanglement of meaning-making technologies and practices, based on her definition (Barad 2007: 146), arguing that writing is not only representational but is also performative, in the sense that it is both as ‘material configuration’ and also a ‘dynamic reconfiguration of the world’. Following Barad, I also make the case that writing in the digital university may be seen as a ‘boundary-making practice’ which is ‘formative of matter and meaning’. This shift - I will argue – moves us away from the various distortions and occlusions which flow from mainstream humanist assumptions about the digital and meaning-making, in particular those which posit the author as a free-floating subject, render artefacts of inscription as ‘tools’, and space and time as inert backdrops. In terms of implications for research, a posthuman analysis calls for

more emphasis on how students and nonhuman actors interact, necessitating a fine-grained, ethnographically-oriented approach which aims to uncover practices which are often private, unobserved, and therefore often occluded in relevant policy and frameworks. I will conclude by discussing how this analysis can contribute to the theme of the conference, focusing on 'rising to the challenge' of meeting the expectations of students in the contemporary digital age.

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