The appropriation and repurposing of social technologies in higher education

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Abstract

This paper presents some of the findings from a recent project that conducted a virtual ethnographic study of three formal courses in higher education that use ‘Web 2.0’ or social technologies for learning and teaching. It describes the pedagogies adopted within these courses, and goes on to explore some key themes emerging from the research and relating to the pedagogical use of weblogs and wikis in particular. These themes relate primarily to the academy’s tendency to constrain and contain the possibly more radical effects of these new spaces. Despite this, the findings present a range of student and tutor perspectives which show that these technologies have significant potential as new collaborative, volatile and challenging environments for formal learning.

Keywords

Digital pedagogies, repurposing, social technologies, wikis, weblogs.

Introduction and background

The nature of Web-based communication and community has changed radically in the last 2 to 3 years. The syndication and authoring capabilities of what has come to be termed ‘Web 2.0’, or the ‘read/write Web’, have spurred the creation of a volatile yet tightly formed social fabric among individuals that would have been impossible to achieve through the static HTML of the earlier Internet era. The technology infrastructure of ‘Web 2.0’ and its associated applications provide the higher education community with authoring and community-building capabilities, the pedagogical implications of which are still largely unexplored.

It is not our aim here to provide a definition of ‘Web 2.0’ or a delineation of its key terms and applications. A useful definition is already available from Anderson’s (2007) JISC (Joint Information Systems Committee) report. Our aim is rather to explore the conceptual implications of these new media environments when they are put to use in formal higher education, with a particular focus on the ways in which the academy appears to be ‘appropriating’ such technologies for pedagogical purposes. Much has been written on the emergent modes of communication, meaning-making and community formation enabled by ‘Web 2.0’ within the university (for example, Alexander 2006; Anderson 2007), but very little formal research that is focused around the application of Web 2.0 technologies in higher education pedagogy has as yet been published.

This paper, by contrast, has generated empirical data from student and teacher use of these technologies in three formal degree programmes spanning undergraduate and postgraduate levels in two large Scottish universities. These programmes included full-time undergraduate students in Divinity and Design Engineering and part-time postgraduate distance learners at Masters level. A broadly virtual ethnographic approach was taken, in which the research associate on the project was immersed in the day-to-day online and offline interactions of learners. Data were drawn from student weblogs, wikis and course discussion boards, and also
generated through interviews with students and teachers. The interviews took place across a range of environments including online chat, Second Life, telephone and face-to-face sessions. Further detail concerning data sources is provided in the succeeding section. The research was funded by the UK Higher Education Academy.

The need for such research is pressing. The currently dominant modes for e-learning within higher education – those enabled by commercial virtual learning environments (VLEs) – are generally failing to engage with the rich potential of the digital environment for learning. Their tendency is to attempt to render the online learning space familiar through a conservative dependence on pre-digital metaphors, signs and practices which are increasingly anachronistic as digital modes gain in social and cultural significance (Cousin 2005; Bayne 2008). In particular, the structural linear hierarchies of the commercial VLE relate it to a logic associated with analogue writing technologies – in particular print – which have, historically, strongly informed our way of generating and distributing knowledge within and beyond academia.

By contrast, the writing and learning spaces represented by the read/write Web are defined by what O’Reilly (2004) has called an ‘architecture of participation’, increasingly oriented towards openness, distributed authorship, collaboration and social networking (Alexander 2006). Web 2.0 learning spaces act more as points of presence, or user-defined Web spaces, than as traditional websites or discussion fora. Web content tends to be less under the control of specialized ‘designers’ and closer to Berners-Lee’s (2000) concept of the Web as a democratic, personal and DIY (Do-It-Yourself) medium of communication. Because it is the social aspect of what is arguably a new Web paradigm which is of most salience to higher education, we generally prefer the term ‘social technology’ or ‘social media’ to ‘Web 2.0’ itself, which has now become an overused and often misappropriated term.

**Research methods**

In this study, three case studies were selected to examine different kinds of teaching and learning contexts using different types of social technologies for different purposes. The cases include undergraduate courses which are on-campus and a postgraduate one which is a distance e-learning programme. In terms of academic disciplines, an engineering design course provides examples of visually rich wiki teaching and learning practices with undergraduate students; a divinity course includes the use of blogs to increase participatory textuality as a prompt for classroom discussion with undergraduates; finally, a Master’s programme in e-learning covers an extensive range of social technologies such as Facebook, del.icio.us, blog, wiki and Second Life.

Data collection was conducted over two semesters beginning in September 2006, during which multiple research methods were adopted for the study. At the first phase of the empirical study, an ethnographic approach was adopted for the two on-campus-based undergraduate courses. This was undertaken through conventional participant observation in order to gain insight into how face-to-face classroom sessions were conducted. For the engineering design course, the researcher observed three different studio/classroom tutorial sessions. This included students’ final PowerPoint presentations (which were part of a group assessment task), including a demonstration of products created by each small work group as well as the final individual feedback session where students demonstrated their individual contribution to the work by showing their own portfolios. In parallel to these activities, virtual ethnography was conducted. According to Hine (2000), systematic and exhaustive participation as well as immersive involvement in the online community is essential for virtual ethnography. However, the virtual ethnography for this research was lighter than Hine advocates because the research site was the actual teaching and learning space for the students, and overactive involvement could have been potentially disturbing to students’ learning and, therefore, it was conducted in a more discrete way.

For the engineering design course, LauLima, which is a visual wiki, was the main instrument for online observation. Regular reviews of activity in this context were undertaken and notes made of developments. For the divinity course, their group blogsite, which was embedded in WebCT, was the main online research site. Along with reading and analysing interactions in the blog, two conventional participant observations were conducted of lectures at an early stage of the course and at its mid-stage. By combining conventional and virtual ethnographic approaches, the study also looked at how online activities develop over time and how they relate
to teaching and learning practices in a face-to-face setting.

For the postgraduate distance learning programme, virtual ethnography was the main research instrument during the first phase of the empirical study. The geographically dispersed nature of the student body meant that this was the most realistic approach to take. It included observational notes, textual data and visual material from different stages of the programme, with a focus on how teaching and learning patterns changed or were sustained over time in students’ blogs, their discussion board comments and their use of Facebook which were all continued throughout the course. For wiki and Second Life, a short series of sessions and learning activities were devoted to these; therefore, the data collection was limited to this period of use. During the Second Life sessions, the researcher participated in the virtual learning space with other students and tutors to observe the interaction, while all the textual conversation was collected from dialogue history in the textual comments. Photographs were taken to create a visual record of avatars and the changes made to them. After Second Life tutorials, two virtual focus groups with eight students in total were arranged to obtain comments on their experience. Such data were also compared with reflections from students’ blogs and discussion board to obtain further insight into how each student responded and reacted to their experience through the whole course.

After the first phase of the empirical study, semi-structured interviews were used to obtain further detailed qualitative data from tutors and students. The ethnographic material helped to identify several key issues which were used as themes for questions and discussion. For the two on-campus-based courses, face-to-face interviews with students were arranged. Eight interviews were undertaken with students from the Engineering Design programme, and six interviews of students studying The ‘Jew’ in the Text course were conducted. For the postgraduate course, interviews with students were conducted in several ways due to the widespread geographical distribution of the students. The methods used were agreed with students beforehand and related to their preferences and availability. This allowed us to explore some of the different attributes and limitations of these different technologies and included face-to-face interviews (with three students) and the use of Internet interviews with Messenger (one student). Second Life interviews were also conducted (three students) involving student avatars. It is worth noting that the quality and quantity of the data collection from different interview instruments were very uneven. In some cases, interviews using Messenger and Second Life had to be terminated because of technical instability/difficulties or simply time inefficiency and they were switched to telephone interviews for completion. However, semi-structured questions allowed us to obtain consistency in the data in terms of relevancy to our research concerns. All the qualitative data, as well as visual data, were collected and qualitative analysis software, NVivo was used during the analysis.

In terms of research ethics, at the beginning of each course, informed consent forms were distributed to explain to students the nature of the research and to guarantee that confidentiality was protected by anonymity. The course providers in each institution were satisfied that appropriate measures for gaining ethical approval had been undertaken and offered full and helpful cooperation.

This paper’s accounts are mainly drawn from the interview data sources which provide reflections from students. Other sources were ethnographic notes produced from virtual ethnographic activity. In the postgraduate distance learning programme, for example, this comprised textual and visual data obtained through students’ blog postings, Facebook profiles, Second Life sessions, discussion boards and interviews with two tutors. In the Divinity course, textual data were obtained through virtual ethnography from students’ group discussion mediated by blog. Further data for this course came from the ethnographic notes of participant observation, conducted twice in a classroom setting and during an interview with a tutor. In the Engineering Design programme, textual and visual data were obtained by virtual ethnography from each group’s wiki sites, from the digital depository (library) for the course as well as from notes derived from participant observation conducted three times in a classroom and once in a studio setting. An additional source was face-to-face interviews with three tutors.

A form of thematic coding was used via NVivo analysis and informed by a prior conceptual framework established by the researchers. The thematic coding involved searching for key topics to identify conceptual
issues throughout the textual data from interviews as well as online textual data obtained mainly from blogsites.

**Sampling**

A study of this size cannot be representative as a complete sampling frame was not available. Our primary concern was not to sample for proportionality but rather to obtain an estimation of the range of responses of three targeted student groups to particular experiences, ideas and practices. Our approach was therefore non-probabilistic purposive sampling. This approach appeared successful for obtaining the opinions of our targeted samples, although with the inevitable proviso that such an approach bears the risk of overweighting subgroups in the chosen population that are more readily accessible.

More particularly, the sampling of students was characterized by the following factors. With the postgraduate distance learning programme, the availability of the students was a consideration. Sampling was purposive to a further extent in that the researchers selected students based on their blog postings in order, potentially, to obtain interesting insights on each issue (e.g. some students performed well in Second Life tasks or participated actively in wiki sessions, leaving interesting comments on certain sessions in their blogs). Certain students were identified as they provided informative and insightful criticisms of certain sessions. A constant consideration was to maintain well-rounded samples overall to balance positive with critical perspectives from students. Ten out of 31 students were interviewed. In the Divinity course, availability of the students was a prime consideration. Six out of ten students were interviewed. In the Engineering Design programme, the course tutors helped identify project groups which produced wiki documents with ‘top quality’, ‘very good quality but with some minor problems’ (e.g. not reflexive or critical enough) and ‘poor quality’ (e.g. not well researched, too much emphasis on visual images with insufficient explanation, etc.) to be able to see the difference among the groups. The number of the students was large in this programme, so the sampling had to be selective, but the selection remained purposive with the help of the tutors as described, as opposed to merely convenient. Eight out of 73 students were interviewed.

**The academic repurposing of social technologies: contexts of use**

The programmes of study that we investigated had appropriated technologies originally designed for social networking (weblogs, Second Life, Facebook), or sharing and bookmarking of personal content (wikis, del.icio.us), and had pedagogically repurposed them to meet specific course design contexts and requirements. A notable distinction between the programmes studied was that one – the MSc in E-learning – is an entirely distance programme taken by a group of students who never meet, while the others (the BSc in Engineering Design and The ‘Jew’ in the Text) were online elements of on-campus undergraduate programmes.

**The MSc in E-learning**

An Introduction to Digital Environments for Learning is the core element of the entirely online MSc in E-learning. In the academic year 2006–2007, 31 students took this course, and the course employed social media in two distinct ways. First, 50% of the final assessment for the course was given for each student’s personal weblog. This weblog remained private to the student – it could not be viewed by any other student, and could only be shared with the course tutor. The interaction within the blog was therefore restricted to the dialogue between student and teacher. The student was required to make reflective and critical entries into their blog two or three times a week across the 12 weeks of the course. The tutor commented on blog entries, using this as a space where each individual student’s thinking could be probed and questioned, further readings could be recommended and one-to-one pastoral support could be given. This was a high-stakes, summatively assessed piece of work for the student but also one in which intensive and formative support was provided by their tutor. It was a space equally for assessment and for the forging of a personal relationship between tutor and distance student. It was also, however, an example of the ‘taming’ or curtailment of the weblog form, in that the global openness of the ‘true’ weblog was replaced by an approximation which, locked within the VLE and restricted to interactions between tutor and single student only, limited much of the riskiness, volatility and connective possibilities of ‘true’ blogging. We return to this point later in the paper.

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The second use of social media within this course was in a 2-week activity in which students were asked collectively to contribute to a wiki on the theme of current representations of e-learning within the global media. Students were asked to spend the 2 weeks researching interesting media constructions of e-learning in the current policy and social context. They then posted into a wiki extracts from the media clips they found while also bookmarking the resource in del.icio.us using a unique shared tag. Over the 2-week block, a diverse picture of their understandings of online education emerged through the contributions of the students, their commentary and the iterative restructuring, or ‘refactoring’, of the wiki page itself. The activity was not assessed.

The second of the MSc in E-learning courses, Course Design for E-learning, worked with a similar idea of wiki pedagogy, extending it into a 3-week learning activity in which students explored and collectively elaborated on five approaches to course design. The wiki was pre-structured by the course tutors, with a certain amount of content pre-loaded: core and secondary readings, an overview of the approach, some examples. This was then worked upon by the students over the 3-week period, as they critiqued the readings, added further examples and resources, discussed the strengths and weaknesses of each approach and built connections between them. By the end of the 3-week block, the wiki had grown into a large, collaborative resource to which students could return as they further refined and applied their understandings of the course design task. The activity was not assessed, although students were required to make reference to the approaches studied in their final assignment.

As well as these specific uses of Web 2.0 technologies, the MSc in E-learning programme used Facebook for social networking, and Second Life as an additional teaching environment. These applications of social technology were also included in the research conducted, although the findings and issues relating to them are not discussed here.

The BSc in engineering design

In the BSc in Engineering Design at Strathclyde University, on-campus students undertaking the Integrated Design Product module were required to work on a group project using the LauLima system, a visually enriched wiki space which was developed from an open source wiki technology called TikiWiki. This course was taken by 73 students during their third year. These full-time students undertook the group project in teams of four. The module, which emulated professional design studio practice, placed high importance on a collaborative ethos and construction of strong group identity linked to responsibility for the task. Students used LauLima, which comprises two online domains, the LauLima Learning Environment as an informal shared workspace and the LauLima Digital Library as a repository of more formal searchable design information (McGill et al. 2005; Grierson et al. 2008). This combined wiki and repository, with a private back-end and public front-end, was designed specifically for the sharing of visual and graphical artefacts. User identities were established as a formal requirement to enter the system, and to restrict access and privileges to those permitted to use the system. This meant that participants could not view anything on the system unless they were a registered user. This was a recreation of the real world professional practices in engineering design industry to encourage students to learn confidentiality and strict practices of protecting data. The system was protected but allowed users to express themselves in a creative way to respond to the assignments and tasks given by the tutors. The latter involved the design of a tin-crushing machine and the demonstration of a rationale for their concept. Through the lectures, coaching and tutorial sessions in classrooms, all the students and tutors were in face-to-face contact while undertaking parallel activity in a virtual environment using the wiki.

The ‘Jew’ in the Text: representations of the holocaust and Jewish identity

Finally, in the undergraduate programme element, the ‘Jew’ in the Text: Representations of the Holocaust and Jewish Identity, part of the Religious Studies suite of courses in a School of Divinity for third- and fourth-year students, the tutor had the explicit intention of promoting student-led discussion using weblogs. The course was taken by ten students in the academic year 2006–2007 and involved a weekly 2-h lecture, plus classroom discussion preceded by a requirement for students to post blog entries on their readings for the course. The tutor viewed the blog as creating an opportunity for more interactive forms of student learning to
emerge and as a prompt for enriched face-to-face class discussions which could take place at a more advanced level than might have been the case without the public and prior ‘thinking-through’ of the topic in the blog. As with the other examples, the ‘Web 2.0’ environment used was one which was locked within and authenticated via an institutional virtual environment rather than globally networked and open. Each blog was open to fellow class members and tutors only, and students were required to take turns in posting substantial blog entries on weekly topics. Other class members would then comment on the blog posting, and the content discussed in this way would act as a starting point for the weekly face-to-face discussions in class.

‘Web 2.0’ pedagogies: learning in the weblog and the wiki

Readings of the data generated from learners’ experiences of these ‘appropriated’ and pedagogically repurposed environments give rise to a number of interesting insights. In the remainder of this paper, we will consider two main themes – first, the way in which students negotiated the presentation of identity and selfhood within the ‘tamed’ and formalized weblog environment and, second, the ways in which the themes of anonymity, etiquette and group responsibility were played out in the class wiki space.

The ‘taming’ of the weblog: ways of writing and the presentation of identity

The purpose of the blog on the Introduction to Digital Environments for Learning course was to allow students to reflect on their course experience, to address their understanding of issues as they arose and to engage with tutors in a one-to-one environment. The tutors on this course were aware that their choice of a private (and assessed) blogging environment was in a sense a compromise. One issue that virtuality opens up is the possibility of manipulation and, by implication, deceit in how people present themselves to others (Bayne 2005). Such concerns tend, however, to overstate the distinction between the virtual and non-virtual spaces people inhabit and how the two interact. One of the overwhelming themes, in student responses to the dilemma of the relationship between their virtual and ‘real’ identities, was the need to maintain some degree of affinity between the two. This was expressed in their

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blogs as the need to be ‘honest’ to themselves. This is described by one student as follows:

I liked to think that I was honest about my identity because I was able to be reflective, I didn’t try to hide my feelings, I was actually very honest about what I was thinking at any particular time, and I didn’t try and pretend to somebody else. I felt that it was a fair reflection on my own personal identity, or maybe my own professional identity with a mixture of my personal feelings as well. (Telephone interview with S)

The idea of ‘honesty’ is interesting because it associates the possibility of presenting alternative constructions of identity as being morally wrong even when it is virtually possible. But the ‘black and white’ nature of this construction leaves little room for the grey spaces between – although some students were willing to explore this. For example, one student commented that the blog allowed him to ‘open up’ a little more than a face-to-face situation would normally permit:

. . . there was a sense in which, in that one that I was disclosing stuff about me, who I am, you know, which is opening up myself to a certain degree. But I think it’s a mixture, . . . sometimes I consciously try to separate myself and would see something as an experiment, and I am just playing with, and it’s not really me. I mean I don’t know whether this is me or not, but I am kind of just inventing something here. So sometimes I got a bit blurred perhaps. (Face-to-face interview with G)

Most writing involves writing for an audience and is part of a social practice rather than an event that occurs in a vacuum. One important aspect of the context within which blogging was used in An Introduction to Digital Environments was its status as an assessed piece of work. The assessment of the blog, perhaps, represents another aspect of its ‘taming’ – the sense in which this public, fragmented and ‘slippery’ form of writing was brought within the constrained and relatively rigid frameworks of formal assessment practice. For one tutor, this was far less a compromise than a positive advantage over other forms of student assessment:

There is also conscious desire to think about how these new social networking tools make possible new forms of expression, and so to use a blog for example as an assessed part of the course, is interesting, a lot of the issues that students have with writing for assessment is that they do not really have a vision of who the audience is and the blogging changes that. So for example I came across a recent study which suggested that if you are looking at programmes to enhance English as a second language then using a blog in that context was better than a paper diary in engaging the students in their language development and that in turn was better than written essays, as written exercises. So the blog as an assessment tool brings back the notion of audience into the frame, so I think that is important. (Face-to-face interview with C)

This perspective was echoed in student interviews, in which the notion of audience often became combined with understandings of the presentation of self, and how that was negotiated:

The fact that only [the tutors] would read what I wrote made it feel more like a conversation with them . . . But I did read the course guide to get a feel for the kind of reflection that would be required. . . . So I was conscious of setting my mind in a particular gear before I wrote anything . . . I guess I was thinking of presenting a particular face to the reader. I’m sure it would be very different if everyone was going to read it. (Face-to-face interview with W)

Some students were conscious of how tutors would see the blog postings and that these would have to conform to tutors’ expectations of what it meant to be a ‘learner’ in this context. For example, one of the students who also has substantial experience as an academic writer put it this way:

I guess for me it was an attempt to be honest about my position as a learner, and to be quite exploratory in terms of what I said. I don’t know that I specifically chose to locate myself as . . . a particular kind of identity, although there were times when I felt, because I knew [the tutor] was reading it and responding to it, there were points at which it was kind of confusing about knowing the blog was open and sort of closed, but knowing that I could speak to [the tutor] and respond to her, but it also being my blog. And that was kind of . . . the first time I did that was a bit of an identity confusion about what a blog was for, sort of the relationship between the student and the tutor. So I don’t know that I would have said I structured myself in a particular way, in terms of my identity, except I suppose as I did locate myself as a student, learning about these new things and reading these new articles, rather than another . . . a writer who knew about the area which is kind of what I am normally doing. (Face-to-face interview with M)

The negotiation of identity in the context of these new writing environments is interesting both for the way in which it highlights issues around the negotiation of online and offline ‘versions’ of the self, and also – particularly within the context of assessment – the way in which it highlights the significance of the exercise of
power through the production of knowledge. As Edwards (1997), drawing on the work of Foucault, has described it, pastoral power might be seen in such uses of the blogging environment as being exercised through ‘confession’, rather than external constraint, and as a process by which the self is constituted as an object of self-regulation.

Confession enables individuals to actively participate in disciplinary regimes by investing their own identity, subjectivity and desires with those ascribed to them through certain knowledgeable discourse (Edwards 1997, p. 9).

Assessed blogs with a focus on reflection can be likened to a confessional space for students to explore, and regulate, their own subjectivity through learning. This can be productive as well as problematic – some kinds of identity work may enable students to learn more, or learn differently, as some of the above quotes from students seem to imply.

The use of the weblog within the course An Introduction to Digital Environments was, as we have said, constrained, formalized and assessed within the context, however, of a non-conventional, distance delivery mode which of itself, perhaps, foregrounds issues of identity and authenticity in the presentation of self among teachers and learners. By contrast, in the case of the on-campus course, The ‘Jew’ in the Text, blogging was used within a quite traditional, on-campus and predominantly face-to-face mode of course design. The tutor of this course had expressed her intention in using the blog as follows:

I think it can encourage them to learn more as a group, and to be more aware of each others’ engagement with the same materials. I think it also enhances the role of the teacher, of them becoming a facilitator rather than somebody who has the authority to speak on a given topic. (Face-to-face interview with A)

The role of the teacher as an authority did not, however, appear particularly to be challenged by weblog pedagogy as it was implemented in this context. The formal nature of the course, the context in which it was located, its academic traditions and the lecture and tutorial inputs reinforced the conventional aspects of student learning which the blog appeared to extend rather than challenge. New ways of writing, or of negotiating issues of individual or group identity, did not appear to emerge. As the tutor commented:

I haven’t noticed that they would write in a way that is different from either their essays or their exam work. I think a lot of them are very similar in how they do that. (Face-to-face interview with A)

In the case of the Religious Studies course, the tutors think it has been successful in encouraging students to read course literature and watch related videos more conscientiously because of the linking of sessions with blogs. They claim that this is also beginning to have a qualitative impact in terms of students producing more analytical and critical contributions as well as making a difference to their readiness to try and understand other students’ viewpoints on the topic prior to the class. In this course, students were not expected to explore any particularly radical identity or communication issues as learners. The purposes of using the blog were more directed at pragmatic concerns such as acquisition of learning skills and knowledge. The tutor commented on her ultimate learning goal for this course as follows:

My goal usually is to try and help them find their own techniques for their own learning; that the class is supposed to be an inspiration and a starting point for their own investigation, and I try to teach them tools in order to relate to primary and secondary sources, and obviously give an overview of the field in the limited period of time they can’t manage for themselves. So I see it more as a kind of skills based-class, quite generic and yet then it enables them to understand one field of study better. (Face-to-face interview with A)

Thus, the blog was perceived as valuable by the students and the lecturer largely in terms of its capacity to enhance the ‘real’ classroom experience. One of the students explained its value in these terms:

I think it’s really good in terms of it kind of forces you to do the reading in advance of the tutorial . . . Also it’s helpful that if somebody else is doing a blog it kind of gives you a summary as well and helps to clarify things, the reading in your mind, before you go to the tutorial. Because sometimes when you read a text it doesn’t really, you read it but it doesn’t really go in, so I think that makes a difference. I think it’s a very positive thing. (Face-to-face interview with N)

By sharing blog postings and comments on the same materials, students also raise questions, identify difficulties in understanding, provide a stimulus for other contributions, and are able to raise related points before attending the class. The blog enhances the opportunity
for students to be more aware of different viewpoints, which can potentially expand the students’ capacity for reading and understanding at a deeper level. In conventional lecture settings, it is rather difficult to know what other students grasp from the same reading material unless tutorials are structured into the programme and these typically occur after course inputs. The circulation of blog postings before the lectures is not only beneficial for students but also for the lecturer, as she or he can be more aware of what level of understanding the students have from the reading and what is required to engage with students’ understanding and to stretch it during the lecture and subsequent discussion.

To conclude, we saw in both these examples of pedagogical blogging a degree of ambivalence in the use of social technologies. On the one hand, it was used to reinforce academic values which related to deepening students’ understanding, their ability to engage in constructive dialogue and critical engagement with source materials, but, on the other, there is a tendency to control and constrain its riskier aspects – to bring this new form of academic writing and communication back within the walls of the academy by assessing it and ‘closing’ it off (in the case of An Introduction to Digital Environments) and by embedding it within a highly traditional approach to teaching and learning, in the case of The ‘Jew’ in the Text. New digital media do not necessarily, it seems, determine new ways of writing or of being within academic programmes. Unsurprisingly perhaps, it was the wider context of course design and the embedding of programmes of study within particular institutional contexts which determined how students negotiated these new writing and learning spaces.

Writing the wiki: trust, editing and the nature of authorship

We considered three courses, or modules, which made formal use of wikis as a medium for learning and teaching: the on-campus BSc in Design Engineering, Course Design for E-learning and An Introduction to Digital Environments for Learning (both elements of the online MSc in E-learning). Wiki textuality has the potential to be radically different from more orthodox, non-digital modes of writing within formal higher education, in that the wiki space is one which is fundamentally unstable and collectively produced, with a tendency to problematize conventional notions of authorship and ownership. It was perhaps not surprising, therefore, to find that students paid quite significant attention to considering the nature of the wiki text, and to negotiating ways of working with, writing with and learning from it.

In considering the nature of the wiki space, students on the Course Design course – which involved a 3-week long learning activity entirely conducted within the wiki – found the wiki environment to be one which was characterized, perhaps surprisingly, by formality and discipline, particularly when compared with the class online discussion board:

Is it just me or is the wiki a more formal way of conducting discussions?
I feel very much that I need to keep my postings less rambling, conjecture and formulating of ideas in the wiki than I do on the discussion boards (probably not a bad thing I hear you say). I find this way of working restrictive, but somehow can’t get past this particular (self-imposed) barrier.
Is it just me? Are wikis more ‘formal’? (Discussion board contribution from Y)

With the discussion board you can read a bit, post a bit, read a bit, post a bit. With the wiki I feel much more inclined to read a lot, formulate my ideas and then post them as a ‘more finished’ summing up of my thoughts rather than much rawer (is that a word?) ideas. So it is probably making me more disciplined. Perhaps that is why I feared treading on others toes – in the discussion board somebody posts an ‘off the cuff’ remark which is easy to agree/disagree with while the wiki (in my eyes) is made up of much more considered arguments which are also much more difficult to agree/disagree with. (Discussion board contribution from B)

While some students relished the ‘disciplined’ nature of the wiki (‘I have enjoyed the wiki as a different, cooler, less frenetic learning space’, commented one learner), others found it strangely lonely, less interactive and less of a ‘community’ space than the conventional discussion board:

I agree that the Wiki feels more formal. ... I feel that I have been working very much in isolation over the last few weeks and wanted to join in the discussions (when I found them) but they were wrapped up some time ago. It’s been my first wiki experience and it’s been interesting but a bit lonely. (Discussion board contribution from G)
I’ve caught myself scuttling back to the discussion board for some interaction (Discussion board contribution from K)
Yet alongside this sense of ‘coolness’ and loneliness within the wiki, was an interesting rethinking of the nature of authorship, and the sense among some learners that the wiki space almost gives permission to ‘be’ a writer in a new way:

The wiki has been a very engaging totally new experience as contributor/author. At first, it was daunting. The idea of contributing content/s and with personalised examples to a Web page that so many people can read, well, it’s just something that I thought only writers would want to get into.

Reading by scrolling up, down; clicking back and forth and in a non linear way with the hyperlinks and videos made the reading of contents more dynamic and in my case more conducive to remembering and learning many new concepts.

I loved the possibility of organising and editing your new/old contents with immediate hyperlinks to references, translations, images, other pages in the wiki or Web with certain ease of use. (Discussion board contribution from U)

These reflections on the nature of authorship within the wiki were echoed by students on An Introduction to Digital Environments for Learning. As one wrote within his weblog:

In making a couple of entries and rephrasing some of the headers it occurred to me that my ‘marks’ in the text are probably ephemeral. They will endure for as long as the interval between editing (minor or major). So a wiki is a dynamic text – it really doesn’t have a form but (changing) content. When it considered completed? Is it just a provisional evolving set of microcontent, juxtaposed texts? Is it pure luck that the ‘authors’ who endure manage to leave a lasting trace are those who happen to arrive at the end – when the ‘uberauthor’ (the course tutor?) halts the process? The process, of course, could just go on, ended by boredom, or exhaustion (everyone ‘written out’). But then the process of social writing could simply be renewed as new ‘authors’ join the fray. (Weblog posting from H)

In a textual space where text is characterized by ephemerality and authorship is problematized, students across all three courses were concerned about ways in which they might accurately attribute authorship and spent some time considering and negotiating the forms of etiquette that applied to the editing and re-factoring of each other’s work. In an interview, one student on An Introduction to Digital Environments commented:

Interviewer: I think most people quite quickly found the trick to sign their contributions, and to make their signature into a readable name, instead of a matriculation number, which happened by default. I wasn’t aware of any disputes about attribution of content, or anything like that.

Interviewee: Being transparent was important?

Interviewer: One key factor on a purely remote e-learning course is demonstrating that you are contributing in an ongoing way. It’s the only way you can show that you ‘turned up for the class’. That’s particularly true from an assessment point of view. So the signatures were probably important in that respect. (Messenger interview with L)

The social practices of writing in the wiki and netiquette surrounding the editing of the contributions of others were areas of concern for students across all courses:

In thinking about editing the text produced by someone else – I felt a considerable reluctance. It somehow seemed unacceptable to mess around with someone’s work. . . . Certainly this is an interesting collaborative exercise. Good fun if only I can allow myself more latitude to alter what is there without feeling I’ll give offence! I’m really intrigued by it – wicked. (Weblog posting by H, Introduction to Digital Environments)

I do think wikis tend to present a finished product that is a consensus more than something like a discussion board, or at least lay out the arguments in several groups . . .

I think we have to be afraid to delete each other’s text in the wiki, which is a different way of thinking than the discussion board, and a more sensitive one. (Discussion board posting by C, Course Design)

There is always a temptation to read through someone’s work and edit it a bit to your liking, and I think that you have got to watch out with that sometimes because you can probably annoy people, so I tried not to edit people’s work too much. If they were saying something then I tended to just try and agree with it, yeah, rather than cause any sort of conflicts. (Face-to-face interview with J, BSc Design Engineering)

For a wiki to work well as a learning space, one which is characterized by genuinely collaborative writing and collective meaning-making, it is perhaps necessary to nurture among students a sense in which it is acceptable to be ruthless (or in H’s words ‘wicked’) – to edit, amend and challenge each other via the direct manipulation of each other’s text. For the teacher in the wiki, the key challenge is perhaps to nurture in students this sense that to do so is not a breach of trust but an act of responsibility and mutuality.

The potential for anonymity within this writing space could have advantages here – the tendency across the courses studied for the wiki to be constrained and
authenticated meant that opportunities for anonymity, and therefore possibly freedom from constraint in editing and amending, were limited. As with the weblogs, it could be that the appropriation and control of the ‘Web 2.0’ learning space by the academy actually functions to limit its radical value as a learning space.

Conclusion

The volatile modes of online interaction enabled by the new social media perhaps sit uncomfortably within existing higher education practice. The communicative landscapes opened up by social media can be spaces of strangeness and troublesomeness to the academy, both epistemologically and ontologically (Barnett 2005). They entail a shift towards new, volatile forms of textual mediation and subject formation and place increasing emphasis on collaborative modes of enquiry and the importance of group self-regulation and self-explanation. They have the potential to alter relations between process and artefact, permit fragmentation over cohesion, exploration over exposition and the visual over the textual. They are characterized by a tendency towards endless re-crafting, often involving rapid patterns of amendment, truncation, revision and addition. They are perhaps a product of speed (Virilio 2000) and fast time (Eriksen 2001), operating through trust and consensus, whereas the cloistered, analogue academy has required slow time, reflection and reference to authority and the authoritative. In the courses and programmes of study considered during this research, we found a tendency for both teachers and learners to ‘rein in’ these potentially radical and challenging effects of the new media formations, to control and constrain them within more orthodox understandings of authorship, assessment, collaboration and formal learning.

Such caution, in the early days of these new media, is perhaps inevitable and understandable. Despite the compromises, it was encouraging to see universities engaging with these new spaces in what were nevertheless novel, productive and enjoyable ways. While a cautious approach to the more radical potential of these digital modes was noticeable, in its repurposing of social technologies, it was encouraging to see the university beginning to acknowledge and engage with the radical potential which the new media represent.

Social media continue therefore to ask us to engage with a new research agenda, to continue to work creatively with new pedagogies appropriate to these novel digital spaces, and to engage with some far-reaching challenges relating to the literacies and assessment practices we bring to bear when we take education online. Many questions remain and a new agenda might start by attempting to address the following questions.

To what extent do the new media challenge our conventional understandings of the way in which knowledge is generated and disseminated within the academy, and to what extent do they challenge or mesh with the changing idea of the university in the age of the digital? Do students possess the forms of ‘technoliteracy’ (Kahn & Kelner 2005) required to manage and produce academic knowledge within such spaces? How can organizational frameworks devised for assessing conventionally written assignments – currently operating through assessment regimes which remain largely locked in transmissive mode – be re-crafted for the open, collaborative and volatile textual spaces of the read/write Web? What kinds of ‘digital pedagogies’ work in these spaces, and how are they perceived and experienced by students? Consideration of such issues indicates that significant challenges remain for us as researchers, teachers and learners in a higher education increasingly informed by the digital.

References


