Digital Literacies: Texts, Knowledge and Power in Higher Education

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Knowledge & power in higher education

I am going to take as the starting point for this paper Henri Giroux’s assertion that there is a 'corporate war on higher education' being conducted by rightwing and neo-liberal power groups (Giroux 2002). Giroux, a critical theorist, regards current trends towards entrepreneurialism and the imposition of business management practices in universities as evidence of a drive for the privatisation and corporatisation of higher education in the interest of capital and the employment market.

This view might seem somewhat paranoid from a European perspective, but one does not have to look very far to see that there is a shift in power going on in our universities. In the UK in recent years we have seen major changes in governance and management in all but he most established of the elite universities. These changes have shifted the control of the university's policies and processes from self-governing academic colleges to 'separated out' top-down management, with a correspondingly reduced autonomy for academics to organise their own work (Dearlove 2002: 262). Systems of representation which had previously maintained constitutional power in the hands of academic members of university Senates have been reformed, with control passing to those holding management positions. Promotions and awards committees, for example, which used to include elected academic representatives, are now likely to comprise only people who have been appointed to line management positions. In this way the performance of every university employee, including its academic members, can be kept in line with the strategic priorities of university senior management.
We are also seeing a shift in control over the curriculum and the creation of teaching material, from academic and disciplinary departments and faculties, to management, production and quality assurance units (Clegg et al. 2003: 47). This shift is particularly evident in universities which are involved in distance education, such as the UK Open University (OU) where the development and delivery of courses has become highly bureaucratised and technologised, and the same importance is given to technical and design considerations relating to delivery via e-learning platforms as is given to academic or pedagogical content. Production and delivery processes are often designed and mediated by 'learning technologists' who may have little academic or teaching background.

Of course, the institutional and governmental policy-makers who are driving these changes in European universities do not view them, as Giroux does, as part of a ‘war on higher education’. In the UK the shift towards managerialism and technologisation is presented as part of a social agenda which is moving from an 'elitist' to a 'mass' higher education system. Greater control over universities by non-academic professional managers is seen as necessary in order to ensure widened participation in higher education by under-represented groups – especially people from ethnic and/or working class backgrounds with no family tradition of entering higher education (UK Department for Children, Schools and Families 2003). These learners, it is claimed, have no interest in the traditional academic view of the university as an ‘ivory tower’ dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. Thus there is a downgrading of academic knowledge in favour of the 'skills' associated with employability, global competitiveness, and so on, many of which are related to new technologies. In this way the discourses of managerialism and of technologisation are ‘naturalised’ (Fairclough 1989 & 2001), so that the power shifts they legitimise appear as natural and inevitable consequences of the wider changes going on in the societies of which universities are part.

Academics who are directly (and often adversely) affected by such changes in their own conditions of work, will recognise the trends that Giroux describes, and researchers in the field of critical discourse analysis will agree with Fairclough's account of the manner in which they are discursively constructed. However, it is one thing
for critical academics to accept that there is a continuous struggle for social power in higher education, but quite another thing for them to go to ‘war’ with either their employers or the corporate sector in general. In any case, to construct social struggle of this kind as war is to impose precisely the kind of ideological uniformity that critical discourse analysis intends to deconstruct (and which, incidentally, Fairclough illustrates with a quotation from 'Mein Kampf', 2001: 72). How then can we relate this kind of critical analysis to teaching and learning in the classroom, where as teachers we still retain some control?

What Giroux’s rhetoric draws our attention to is the impact of new management practices on the continuing ability of institutions of higher education to teach people how to critique current social, political or scientific orthodoxies, and how to articulate alternative understandings and ideologies. Critique is deeply embedded in the historical knowledge-construction practices and written literacies of the university, in the teaching of ‘critical thinking’ and argumentation, in the traditions of academic debate, research and scholarship (see, for example, Scriven & Paul 2007). But the shift of power in the university is bringing about a re-gearing of the curriculum towards the requirements of employers, and a new dependence of research on external and corporate funding. These conditions do not favour the development of critical opposition to the exercise of ideological power. Furthermore, the written literacies of the university struggle with a new emphasis on ‘generic’ communication skills, specifically those that involve the use of information technologies (see Fairclough 1999: 80-81 for a discussion of this trend in higher education in the UK). A key pedagogical and research task for university academics in this changing world is therefore to understand the impact of new technologised systems of teaching and learning on the continuing development of critical thinking in the classroom, and, if possible, to make this understanding evident to learners and teachers.
Researching Digital Literacy Practices in the University

My colleague Mary Lea and I have identified three key shifts in educational practice which we believe are associated with the emergence of 'e-learning' as the dominant discourse of pedagogical innovation in the university (Goodfellow & Lea 2007). The first is from disciplinary to professional modes of knowledge production (Gibbons et al. 1994); the second is from teaching to the management of learning (e.g. Littlejohn et al 2007), and a third is from print-based to screen-based communication (e.g. Snyder (ed) 1998). In this, and other work (Goodfellow 2005, Goodfellow & Lea 2007, Lea forthcoming), we draw on an 'academic literacies' perspective (Lea & Street 1998) to investigate the discourses and practices of teaching and learning associated with these shifts. Academic literacies work takes account of relations of power in the university, of the authority of the institution, and of its students who are increasingly autonomous and non-academically-schooled learners. From this perspective we argue that dominant practices in e-learning that focus on interaction and communication skills tend to marginalise learners' engagement with bodies of knowledge and the literacies of disciplinary communities. These literacies have conventionally valorised writing as the medium through which analytical and critical thinking is developed.

We further argue that with the adoption of e-learning on a large scale also comes the potential absorption into university teaching and learning of informal online communication practices drawn from the internet at large. These multi-modal and highly interactive practices are being construed in some quarters as entirely new forms of text production, even as new 'digital literacies' (Lankshear & Knobel 2003) but the affordance they offer for a critical approach to academic practice is tenuous. Some authors associated with the 'multi-literacies' movement (New London Group 1996) have proposed that critique should in fact be superceded by a new curriculum principle of 'design', which is more appropriate to the reshaping of education by employment, markets, media, and lifestyle groupings (Kress 1998, p.76-77). A particular relevance for design is thought to be implied by
the growing domination of the visual mode and the increasing power of the logic of the image over that of the written text. However, there is a sense in which this view is itself in thrall to the ideology of ‘global scenario(s)…driven by technology and economic imperatives’, and fails to promise any new capacity to analyse ‘existing structures of inequality, old hierarchies, and patterns of exclusion’ at the local level (Mathews 2005: 211).

Fairclough and others have argued for critical discourse awareness to be part of the higher education curriculum, as a means of making such structures, hierarchies and patterns evident (Fairclough 1999). Others have related this to new technologies in the classroom, for example, the Computers and Composition movement in the US in the 1980s & 90s, which gave rise to a number of studies of pedagogies and technologies drawing on critical discourse analysis (Le Court 1998, Barton 1990). Some of this work, in its earlier stages when digital technology was relatively new, sought to raise the critical awareness of learners through the use of the computer as a means of challenging the dominance of conventional essayist literacies and the classroom relations they embed. However, as I argue here, the problem we now face is that this technology has become naturalised as e-learning in the service of a non-critically-reflective approach to teaching and learning, which means that critical digital literacies are themselves ‘at stake’ in the power struggle (Fairclough 2001:73) as well as being a site where struggle is going on. To illustrate this situation I will use a case study from my own teaching context in the OU’s online ‘Masters in Online and Distance Education’ programme. This study explores aspects of the complex relation between critique and design in study activities which are conducted online and which require the production of digital texts as part of the learning outcome.

Digital texts: Case Study

I am going to focus on students on a course which is itself about e-learning, who are currently-practising or soon-to-be-practising
teachers and course designers from post-compulsory and corporate training sectors of educational systems around the world. The course is a typical example of the practice-based and professional subjects which are currently widespread in the higher education curriculum at Masters level. Because the learners are studying at a distance, all group work is carried out online. In addition, almost all the texts and resources that might be brought to bear on a task are accessed online. This exemplifies what I earlier described as the shift from books or print to screen-based text. In keeping with the focus on professional learning, and its emphasis on reflection on practice and on teamwork, much of the study activity of the course consists of group tasks which are carried out collaboratively online. The role of the teacher is primarily to set up and manage the conduct of the tasks and the opportunities for learning that they present. In addition, assessment is carried out by means of an e-portfolio system in which learners present ‘evidence’ of their learning, which they select from the outputs of the activities and tasks they have been involved in (see Goodfellow & Lea 2007 pp.130-134 for a discussion of this approach). This is an example of the shift from teaching to learning management.

Here is an example of a study task from this course, which encapsulates these features of the ‘new’ technologised curriculum and its associated pedagogies. This task concludes a unit entitled ‘researching e-learning practice’ in which students have been discussing what is meant by ‘good practice’ in e-learning, and how this can be evaluated in the form of competences that practitioners may be expected to demonstrate:

- Share materials that you consider to be examples of good elearning practice
- Discuss your views on good practice and illustrate them with the materials you have selected.
- Relate the good practice you identify to the assessment of competence
- Prepare a group presentation of your findings in the form of a poster (for example, using powerpoint)
This task is intended to be carried out online by a group of about six students, over a two-week period. The teacher's involvement will be minimal, usually confined to moderating the online discussion and responding to direct questions. The materials that are the focus of the discussion consist largely of websites and online articles that have been provided as course resources, plus those that the learners themselves have found and made available to the group. The group presentation is developed through a process of sharing and comparing materials and negotiating roles in the design and construction of the poster. The final outcome is published in one of the course online discussion forums for everyone on the course to see and comment on. At a later point some of the students may then include the presentation in the personal e-portfolio they submit for the end-of-course assessment. In this case they are required to identify the nature and extent of their own individual contribution to the group task, so that they can be given an individual grade.

The task does not explicitly require learners to engage in critical thinking about e-learning practice. It explicitly encourages 'views' rather than objective analysis. Moreover, its framing as the production of a poster (rather than, for example, a report) has the effect of foregrounding the task of design rather than of critique. In these pedagogically significant ways, the task is complicit with the practice-focused, technologised curriculum. However, elements of the task do implicitly offer the possibility for critical analysis. Firstly, it has a clear conceptual component ('relate practice to competence') which might be realised through abstract processes such as argument, reflection, critique etc. Secondly, as a text produced in the context of a formal, accredited, Masters course, the task is implicated in an assessment process. Assessment genres are a recognisable academic practice, and although in this particular case the assessment procedure, via an e-portfolio, is perhaps less familiar than the essays, projects and reports that most learners and teachers are used to producing or marking, the power relations are the same and are themselves available for scrutiny as e-learning practice. Thirdly, although the task is focused on professional practice rather than a body of academic knowledge, the output is itself an academic literacy practice. Research posters are seen at conferences where people summarise their activities and projects in the form of a static display, rather than as
part of an oral presentation. This genre would be familiar to those who attend conferences, academic or otherwise, however, the suggestion to use Powerpoint to produce it is actually at odds with the genre. Powerpoint is recommended for this task simply because it is a familiar and available tool for the production of visual material, but it is more commonly used to produce sequences of slides to accompany oral presentations rather than for static posters. This slight mismatch between the academic task and the digital tool opens up the possibility for both reflections on the task itself and alternative interpretations of its outcome.

In order to examine the roles that design and critique play in the presentation and evaluation of the outcomes of this task, I will consider two examples of digital texts produced by last year’s cohort (there were about 10 groups in all), which differ quite markedly in the ways that the task has been conceived and executed. I should note at this point that I am not going to be saying anything about the task organisation and knowledge construction that went on in the groups during the two-week online discussion period that preceded the presentation of these texts. There is much that could be said about this process and its role in the shaping of these textual outcomes, but this is for another paper. The focus here is on the classroom practice of presenting groupwork for evaluation, and the effect of the digital medium in shaping and/or constraining the critical affordances of what is produced. Suffice it to say, for the moment, that the two groups spent equivalent amounts of time discussing and preparing these presentations, and the material and conceptual differences between the outcomes do not appear to have been the consequence of any fundamental difference in the way the groups went about negotiating the task.
Figure 1: Group A’s poster (student names blacked out)

Introduction

This poster highlights a number of examples of e-Learning practice drawn from case studies read by group members in the course of their research. The selected principles represent those that the group felt were the most important in this subject area at this time. The intended audience for this poster is our colleagues, future students and teams.

Top 3 Principles of e-Learning

1. Development: linking progress with learning principles (DEAL).
2. Top 3 Principles of e-Learning: linking progress with learning principles (DEAL).

Case Studies

Central Regional Community College (CRCC), Australia

- Uses tools and techniques to support online learning environments: an e-briefing for a research project.
- Uses tools and techniques to support online learning environments: an e-briefing for a research project.

University of Edinburgh (ESVAC), 2002

- Involves the integration of information technology with subject matter.
- Involves the integration of information technology with subject matter.

University of Waterloo (Perry Light), 2003

- The activities require participation in the design and development of course content.
- The activities require participation in the design and development of course content.

Methodology

Communications: Group meetings and individual students

Student learning: Self-directed student learning

Examples used: In Source, AMI

Methodology communicated via shape and structure

Research:
- Principles derived from the definitions of the Learning Network (LNE), 2000

CHALMERS: acceleration of learning and teaching at a distance (2000-2002)

Competencies

- Operational (progress through the Media Lab)
- Intellectual (process through the Media Lab)
- Conceptual (progress through the Media Lab)
- Communication (progress through the Media Lab)
- Independent learning (process through the Media Lab)
- Knowledge and understanding (progress through the Media Lab)
- Synthesis and analysis (progress through the Media Lab)
- Problem-solving (progress through the Media Lab)
- Innovation (progress through the Media Lab)
- Teamwork (progress through the Media Lab)
- Professional practice (progress through the Media Lab)
- Reflective practice (progress through the Media Lab)
- Collaboration (progress through the Media Lab)
- Creativity (progress through the Media Lab)

References


Group A’s output is in the form that was suggested in the task – a poster such as one might see in an academic conference giving an overview of a research or development project. It was produced in powerpoint, also as suggested in the task, although as a single slide not as part of a sequence. It was also produced as a PDF file, which would enable it to be printed out and enlarged for use in a physical setting if required.

Whilst this text would not win any prizes for its design, which is rather cluttered and visually uninteresting, it does conform closely
to the genre of an academic poster: it has a title ('Way to go – E-learning Good Practice'), and an introduction which specifies the audience ('colleagues, tutors, course teams...'). The content is laid out for visual access, in six boxes, three of which contain text that has been copied from the websites of a variety of institutions and organisations concerned with e-learning, plus some authored comments which relate the sources to each other and to the themes of the task. These three boxes are headed: 'Top 3 principles of E-learning', 'Case studies', and 'Competences'. Of the other three boxes, one contains references in an academic style, another is headed 'methodology' and contains bullet points listing the main channels of communication used by the group in completing the task, and the three main resources that were used in the selection of content, and the third has the names of the people in the group. The text also contains a number of images: in the top left corner, the icon from the group's discussion forum for this task; in the right top corner the Open University logo; on the left a hand-drawn cartoon of a measuring tape with a smiley face and a speech balloon with a comment about how the examples in the poster were assessed; the logo of the Netherlands e-learning partnership; in the bottom left the logo of the Association for Learning Technology. All the text is the same font face in different sizes, with blue used for headings.

In terms of its overall topic, it is thematically relevant to the task, dealing with e-learning 'good practice', 'competences' and other course themes, and also shows evidence of analysis in the relation of principles to practice and to examples from its case studies. It is procedurally relevant to the task in the sense that it does seem to be group-authored and contains reference to materials from sources external to the group. In all these aspects the group do appear to have generated 'findings' from a knowledge construction exercise.
Figure 2: Group B’s second slide

Group B's output is also presented in powerpoint, but in this case it consists of four slides to be viewed sequentially, the middle two being animations. The poster form has been replaced here by something more appropriate to a live presentation, with the verbal message - there are only about 150 words in the whole text - subordinated to an attention-grabbing, moving visual metaphor. The first and fourth slides each contain four slogans about e-learning, two in title fonts and two in smaller face. The slogans are addressed to 'E-learning professionals' and urge them to teach themselves to use e-learning and to excel with it. The slogans use rhyme and alliteration - 'there's no race it's at your pace', 'plan, prepare and proof test before you present the package' etc. - superimposed over cartoons (apparently downloaded from one of the internet 'clipart' collections) showing
respectively a man in conflict with his computer and a woman happily working at hers. The second and third slides contain the animated jigsaw motifs, entitled 'best practices in E-learning' and 'worst practices in E-learning' respectively, with the title running vertically up the left hand edge of the slide (see Figure 2). On each slide coloured jigsaw pieces (nine in slide 2 and six in slide 3) carrying topics or slogans such as 'formative feedback', 'users are people not guinea pigs', 'suck it and see' etc. arrange themselves on the screen using the powerpoint custom animation function. On the second slide ('best practice') the pieces arrange themselves into a completed puzzle, on the third slide (worst practice) they remain unconnected.

In terms of its overall topic, this text is relevant to the task in that it focuses on e-learning practice, but it does not relate this to the issue of the assessment of competence nor indeed provide any evidence of practice at all. If anything, the slogans on the first and last slides suggest that it the development of good practice is simply a matter of individual conviction. There are no 'findings', no evidence of group activity, and no use of materials from outside the course.

Digital literacies: Discussion

Whilst each of these texts is the outcome of the same task instructions and similar group consultation processes, their presentation of the subject matter of the task, use of digital design, and affordance for critical thinking about the topic, either by the texts' authors or by their readers, differ markedly. Some points of contrast are obvious, for example the language. Text A is recognisably an academic genre and the language is broadly formal ('principles', 'methodology', 'issues', 'processes', 'contexts' etc.). It attempts to engage with the concept of good practice on an analytical level, although it is not discursive in the normal way of academic argument, consisting largely of non-sentences and bullet point grammar. Text B, on the other hand, has few academic discourse markers. The language is informal and addresses its audience directly ('you', 'yourself' etc). It engages with the notion of good practice on a non-analytic, intuitive level and its
stylistic features have more in common with advertising copy than with academic writing.

Another immediate contrast is in the relation between the rhetorical purpose of the texts and their design features. In Text A the relation is non-complementary: visual design features are present but are so minimal as to be ineffective for attracting or holding attention; sections of text have either been authored, or assembled by copying and pasting from external sources, but the original typography of the copied texts has been modified to give a unified appearance, so that it is impossible to tell whose words we are reading. In this respect, the group's ownership of the knowledge constructed is obscured, and the academic convention of attribution has been undermined, even though references for the sources have been provided. Moreover, the use of logos, presumably intended to support the acknowledgement of sources, appears to breach the copyright of the logo owners as there is no evidence of permission to reproduce them. By contrast, in Text B the relation is complementary, insofar as the rhetorical purpose of the text is simply to gain attention for its message. The substantive content is minimal, subordinated to a simple overall message aimed at a very generalised audience (an exhortation to good practice in e-learning) and the design focuses on visual impact achieved through animation. In this it is very effective, as the moving jigsaw pieces command attention, regardless of the significance, or otherwise, of their slogans.

From a critical perspective, the two texts share a significant characteristic. That is, both work to naturalise the discourse of 'good practice in e-learning'. Text A reproduces the 'official' discourse, through its use of extracts imported from external authoritative websites. The authority of these extracts is reinforced by the use of organisational logos. The text does not reflect critically on this discourse – there are no contested definitions, nor contradictory findings referred to, nor any indication of disagreement amongst the sources (the features one would expect to find in an essay on the same topic). However, the presence of multiple voices in the text and an overt analytical dimension that relates concepts in a systematic way creates a potential space for a critical dialogue, which might develop in discussion with an audience, or internally through individual reflection, or between the group members and the tutor as part of the
assessment process. The digital medium in this case has enabled individuals working together at a distance to construct a space for analytical thinking, but it is working in some ways to undermine the objectivity towards the subject matter out of which a meaningful critique might emerge.

Text B unashamedly reproduces and naturalises the informal discourse of good practice in e-learning with no attempt at a critical or analytical perspective. Good and bad e-learning practice alike are personalised as a matter of individual sense and sensitivity, and therefore as beyond argument. Dynamic and visual elements create an engaging single voice guaranteeing the short-term attention of its unspecified audience, but there is no attempt to engage in any kind of explanation of the concepts referred to, nor to attribute opinion to any particular authoritative source. It is very difficult to imagine a critical dialogue developing around this text, unless it were intended to be an ironic comment on the very type of social and commercial literacy practice that it typifies. In this case the digital medium is quite closely implicated in the literacy practice – its transient, visual, animated quality in a sense is part of the message of the text. It is a digital literacy practice, but it offers little scope for enhancing critical awareness of the discourse it reproduces.

Finally, from the perspective of critical pedagogy the relation of each text to the reproduction of conventional relations of power between teacher and students through the assessment process, is significantly different. Text A is a group-created course assignment that adheres closely to the task instructions and enables individual members of the group to identify their own contributions for the purpose of assessment. The text thus offers the tutor/marker all the clues they would need for a grading exercise, and in doing so helps to reproduce the conventional power structure of the classroom. Text B offers very few cues as to how it could be graded against the original task, and none as to how individual contributions might be identified. Effectively, it ignores the assessment process, or else it seeks to transform it by bringing it into line with a genre more closely associated with commercial promotion than with academic research or pedagogical practice. This might be seen as an act of resistance, perhaps deliberately drawing on a non-authoritative form in order to undermine the authority of the academic institution. Alternatively, it
might be an unintended consequence of a non-reflective concern with design and the exploitation of the digital medium, at the expense of a more substantive engagement with the subject matter.

I suggest that we can see in the comparison of these two digital texts a microcosm of the wider power struggle between the academic values of critique and argument such that are embedded in the conventional written literacies of the university, and the popular media values of design and personalisation that are shaping the digital practices of the commercial and social media worlds. At the same time, however, that the scope for critical analysis of wider social practice offered by academic literacies is greater, it also seems that digital literacies may draw on a greater capacity to transform the texts and tasks of the classroom itself, and therefore for to reshape the power relations which classrooms normally sustain.

Conclusion

I have argued that there is a power struggle going on in Higher Education that exemplifies the ideological struggle critical discourse analysts have claimed exists at all levels of the use of language and the production of texts. This struggle has at stake the role of higher education in teaching people to reflect critically on the power relations that shape all our lives, and the role of digital literacy practices in both the construction and critique of these relations. I have suggested that the struggle works through into teaching and learning in the university via parallel shifts: in the curriculum – away from disciplinary knowledge production and towards professional practice; in pedagogy - away from teaching and towards the management of learning; and in textual communication – away from print and towards electronic text. These shifts come together in the rapidly expanding practices of e-learning. I argued that digital literacy practices emerging out of the social relations of the internet and being absorbed into university teaching and learning, were becoming both a site for and a stake in the struggle for the role of critique. To illustrate this I discussed digital texts produced by groups of professional learners at the Open
University, and I concluded that whilst digital practices might undermine academic critique of professional practice, they could become a means of transforming that practice. Transformation without critique, however, is unlikely to redress inequalities in power in higher education, and what is required is a marriage of academic and digital literacies and a new will to contest the ownership of university pedagogical practice.

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