

Literacy in the Digital University: developing a research agenda (0155)

This talk summarises outcomes from an ESRC-funded seminar series, held between October 2009 and April 2011, which brought together researchers and practitioners involved in four research projects focused, in different ways, on literacy, tertiary education, and digital communication (LIDU 2010). Apart from disseminating the research of the four projects involved, the seminars also set out to develop an agenda for new research, exploring current and predicted developments in practices around literacy and digital communication in higher and further education.

Although all four projects had an explicit or implicit focus on literacy, they represent a range of conceptual, methodological, pedagogical, and political approaches to a set of issues which have recently tended to become aggregated under the label 'digital literacy' (eg: Lankshear & Knobel 2010, JISC Digital Literacies Programme 2011).

'Digital Literacies in Higher Education' (DLHE) - an ESRC-funded project at the Open University from 2007-2008, and 'Literacies for Learning in Further Education' (LlLFE) - an ESRC/TLRP project at Lancaster University from 2004-2007 were both located within the explicitly linguistic tradition of New Literacy Studies (Gee 2000). DLHE drew on an 'academic literacies' conceptual framework (Lea & Street 1998), and LlLFE on a 'situated literacies' (Barton et al 2000) one. Both these approaches are interested in unpicking the complex of social meanings that literacy practices in further and higher education have, although DLHE focused explicitly on the digital practices of students in the classroom context, whilst LlLFE addressed the everyday practices of students in work and college contexts. DLHE set out to respond to the rhetorics of the 'digital native' student (eg: Prensky 2004) via a close-grained ethnographic study of what students in three different contexts of higher education are doing with technologies in their studies (Lea & Jones 2011). LlLFE was concerned with the notion of 'boundaries' between literacy contexts and the way these could be used to inform pedagogical interventions.

In contrast, 'Learning Literacies for a Digital Age' (LLiDA 2009) - a JISC-funded project at Glasgow Caledonian University in 2008-2009. was a project driven by JISC policy for the promotion of digital technologies in education. This project was located within a more instrumental tradition of learning technology studies. It drew on a background of debates around the similarities and differences between information literacy, ICT literacy, media literacy, digital literacy etc. as descriptions of the kinds of technical skills and competencies that learners need to acquire (Lankshear & Knobel 2008). The project focused on producing input to future policy action on learning technologies, and adopted an a-theoretical perspective, reflected in its rejection of all of the above terms in favour of 'learning literacies'. LLiDA undertook a series of case studies of provision for

support for learners' digital study skills in UK higher and further education institutions.

And also by contrast, Putting Web 2.0 to work: New Pedagogies for New Learning Spaces (NPNLS) – an HEA at Strathclyde and Edinburgh universities in 2007-2008 was located within a broadly critical and cultural media studies perspective, with only a marginal connection to explicit discussion of literacy (through the 'techno-literacy' work of, e.g. Kellner 2004). Its focus was on pedagogical innovation within a specific learning context exemplifying features of emerging social media environments. The project carried out a 'virtual ethnography' looking at digital textual practices in three courses in a single institution.

All these projects have produced extremely interesting accounts of literacy practices, participant characteristics, research methodologies etc. in a range of contexts of further and higher education. But bringing these disparate peoples and approaches together to discuss concepts, practices and methodologies was one thing -- ensuring coherent outcomes was quite another!

An agenda for new research

Three key research themes arose from these seminars:

1. 'Digital Scholarship'. Whilst the Open University is the only institution in the seminar group which has formally instituted a digital scholarship development program, there is clearly a wider sectoral relevance in the concept, which aligns with notions of public engagement as well as academic literacy practice. How do new digital communication contexts impact on, and change our understanding of, what we and our students do as scholars? Are we simply re-conceptualising conventional ideas of scholarship in order to preserve them in the 'digital university', or are we open to the challenge of completely new academic and study practices? Is the conventional notion of scholarship as a solitary, reflective, individual activity still relevant, or will it be swept away by the 'fetishisation' of digital interactivity?

2. The 'Borderless University'. The importance, stressed by the LfLFE group, of keeping Further Education in the frame when we are talking about the 'digital university', and the relationship between the academy and the workplace (also flagged by the LLiDA participants), raises complementary questions about the university as a workplace and the kinds of knowledge practices that the breaking down of boundaries might imply.

3. 'Post-human pedagogies'. The NPNLS group raised the possibility of a joint research agenda that addressed the re-conceptualisation of conventional boundaries within the digital domain. They linked this to a philosophical move to post-humanism, by which they meant a questioning of humanistic presumptions

about agency in assemblages that involve the individual, the social, and the technical. This perspective creates particular problems for Education, which is traditionally based on humanist principles.

Summary

During this seminar series many of us developed our thinking about digital practices in positive ways, moving on from positions in which we either saw 'the digital' as a kind of Trojan horse in a war that commoditisation was waging on education, or else as a magic wand in the transformation of ineffective traditional teaching into a modern panacea. In addition, we have successfully problematised simplistic ideas of 'the digital university', revealing complexities in individuals' relations to technology and its place in academic practice that challenge the idea that all that is required is an 'upskilling' of the workforce to the level of the incoming 'net generation of students' (see Goodfellow 2011). These ideas, and the emerging research agenda they inform, are currently being written up by the LIDU group as a collection of papers from the seminars, to be published by Routledge in the coming year.

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