Rehearsing Identities via Online Journals

Simon Perkins
Nottingham Trent University
simon.perkins@ntu.ac.uk
Simon Perkins is the Multimedia Programme Leader for the Bachelor of Arts (Hons) and Bachelor of Science (Hons) degrees at Nottingham Trent University in the UK. His research interests concern efforts to reconcile diverse and competing knowledges within open and shared online environments. The research includes the development of his Constellations metaphor and evolving embedded theory.

Jools Ayodeji
Nottingham Trent University
julius.ayodeji@ntu.ac.uk
Julius Ayodeji's research focus involves the study of linear and non-linear narrative and the place of narrative techniques in screen-based temporal work. The use of interactive multimedia is a particular area of interest that informs his research and teaching.

Abstract

Nottingham Trent University (NTU) Multimedia students are rehearsing their practices into existence. They are doing so through their use of online journals. They are learning to assimilate knowledge through a process of knowledge integration (Boyer 1990) and identity rehearsal. They are documenting their practices as their practices evolve through a process of scripting (Barthes 1970) where their individual narratives are able to unfold over time in full public view. This is further affirmed by the intervention of staff making comments on individual student journals. The process is providing an opportunity for students to participate as members of Communities of Practice (Wenger 1998). In doing so they are able to recognise and share their capacity as cultural expressions located within a broader network of symbolic exchange (Castells, 2000). The opportunity is offering students agency within the contemporary global context whose "acceleration", "risk", "complexity", and "reflexivity" (Beck, Giddens and Lash, 1994) threatens to stifle experimentation and overwhelm creative endeavour. The experience is providing students with a way of recognising and responding to ambiguity that Jeff Conklin characterises as wicked problems (Conklin 2001). The nature of the rehearsal process means that students are able to reflexively negotiate their own terms as they forge new opportunities for collaborating and establishing their own practice within the broader network of global interconnections.
Keywords

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Introduction

Students in the Multimedia degree programme at Nottingham Trent University (NTU) are requested to keep online journals in the form of weblogs. They do so to document their evolving design practice and experimentation. The students set up their journals as part of their first year induction and maintain them through the three years of their study (often continuing them after they have graduated). Typically each year of the three-year Multimedia programme has approximately 70 full-time enrolled students, so there are approximately 210 NTU Multimedia Programme student weblogs in total at any one time. The online journal initiative has been running now for three years. It is maintained through the use of a centralised list located at: [http://reflectivejournal.co.uk](http://reflectivejournal.co.uk) which functions as a web portal for unifying the heterogeneous collection of links. An open source RSS aggregator [http://feedonfeeds.com](http://feedonfeeds.com) (Minutillo, 2007) is also used by academic staff to support their maintenance and review procedure.

Links to staff online journals are also published through the portal. Doing so helps to provide further evidence of staff support and engagement with the initiative. These links help to identify staff as both members of the community and as creative practitioners active within their field. Staff weblogs potentially provide useful insight into the interests of staff and have led to discussion between staff and students as to how these personal interests and influences, coupled with the professional creative practice of staff described on the staff journals affect the pedagogic delivery of discipline specific content within the Multimedia programme.

The purpose of the initiative has changed somewhat over the three years that it has been running. After initially being set up by the Multimedia team to extend their existing pedagogic practices, the initiative now forms a central aspect of the programme’s student learning strategy. The journals are used by students to document their practice and by staff to review the students' progress and development. The linear ordering process used in blogging software also provides a useful way of unfolding the incremental steps involved in working through design problems into a single narrative trajectory. In this way the trajectory presents a graphic illustration of each student's individual design process and learning development.

Importantly each student maintains his or her own journal. They are not provided by the university and in fact are only voluntarily shared with the institution by each student. This
arrangement represents a radical departure from typical online learning policies, driving for example NTU’s recently deployed Virtual Learning Environment (Desire2Learn Incorporated, 2008). These policies typically limit students’ access to the use of the central university online infrastructure and seek, in their design to replicate a ‘virtual’ representation of the classroom. The student can access ‘their’ module or ‘their’ course in an institutionally-imposed top-down structure. In breaking with this approach, students are able to operate with independence and autonomy integrating collections of their own work with that of others\(^1\). They are even able to build their own information networks through subscribing to RSS streams e.g. an RSS stream located at: [http://folksonomy.org.uk/?rss=new](http://folksonomy.org.uk/?rss=new) (Perkins, 2009b) which enables students to receive feeds delivered directly to their journal.

The act of using the journals help students to rehearse their identity as creative practitioners. It provides a means for them to document and reflect on their progress in a public context. It enables them to locate themselves within their peer group as they operate collectively to establish what Wenger (1998, p.86) refers to as a “shared histor[y]of learning” within the broader field of digital culture. In doing so, the student cohort becomes a Community of Practice (CoP) in which they “discuss novel ideas, work together on problems, and keep up with developments” (Wenger, 1998, p.86). They are able to engage in “dense relations of mutual engagement” (Wenger 1998 p.86). Thus opportunities are afforded to engage in nuanced collaboration. Collaboration in which both agreement and discord are allowed and values reflective of that community. Belonging to Communities of Practice in this way provides a valuable mechanism for students to reflexively interpret and rehearse their terms of engagement within the broader cultural field.

This is significant because it provides a means for students to engage within an otherwise potentially debilitating context identified by Beck, Giddens and Lash (1994, p.18) as Reflexive Modernization. A context causing feelings of increased “risk”, “complexity” and “reflexivity” brought on by destabilised traditional social, political and economic structures. By operating collectively in this way students are able to mitigate some of the more entervative effects of this situation. They are able to construct and rehearse personalised narratives of practice that are simultaneously reinforced by their collective association. The personalisation of creative expression, engagement and conceptual understanding that the journal mechanism allows can be seen as a response to this situation where the students are

\(^1\) computer games published to [http://www.newgrounds.com/](http://www.newgrounds.com/) (Fulp, 2006) and videos published to [http://www.youtube.com/](http://www.youtube.com/) (YouTube, LLC., 2009)
able to negotiate pressures brought on by increased individualisation. ‘Individualisation’ in this context involves

first, the disembedding and, second, the re-embedding of industrial society ways of life by new ones, in which the individuals must produce, stage and cobble together their biographies themselves.

(Beck, Giddens, Lash, 1994 p.13)

The pressures of responding in these circumstance can be evidenced in the following journal post made by a first year student:

up until this point, I have not really seen the benefit of completing my online journals, as I think nobody really reads them, but I do not think that it is really the point. The point is my thoughts about my, and others' work by evaluating, which will allow me to complete my work with a better understanding. Does it really matter, that I think nobody really reads what I write, only that I improve as a practitioner.

(anonymous Multimedia student 2008a)

By explicitly articulating personal concerns in this forum, the Multimedia student is able to receive support (despite the concern voiced otherwise) while at the same evidences their “ability to take charge of [their] own learning” (CIEL 2000). In doing so, the student begins to 'rehearse' their personal narrative of practice.

While the reflectivejournal.co.uk portal works as a practical solution for centrally organising the journals it also operates as a tangible approach for engendering CoP ideals. The portal provides opportunities for students to engage in a way that Lave and Wenger refer to as Legitimate Peripheral Participation (LPP). In this way students using the portal participate “as a way of learning - of both absorbing and being absorbed in - the 'culture of practice.'” (Lave and Wenger 1991). Through LPP the portal enables students to become acculturated into the established discourse and practices of the Multimedia programme.

A salient example of the influence of the reflectivejournal.co.uk portal for promoting LPP can be seen in anecdotal evidence from recent candidate interviews occurring in January 2009. In this instance two prospective students were able to discuss in some detail the online journals of two current second year Multimedia students. The candidates clearly used the site as a window into the programme as a way of learning about the local culture of practice. One of the candidates even went so far as to set up their own online journal modelled on the journal
of one of our current students. The candidate made use of the journal during their interview to evidence their experimentation and general engagement with the subject.

Using the reflectivejournal.co.uk portal to aggregate journals also helps students to recognise the social nature of design thinking. Through their participation as a CoP member students are able to recognise that their cultural expressions are located within a broader network of cross-disciplinary symbolic exchange. Where their expressions feed into the common hypertext which for Castells (2000) represents as a fundamental requirement of contemporary communication. For Castells

> there is one common language, the language of the hypertext. Cultural expressions left out of the hypertext are purely individual experiences. The hypertext is the vehicle of communication, thus the provider of shared cultural codes.  

(Castells, 2000).

In this way the portal represents a hub for linking into the general hypertext of cultural exchange.

Using online journals in this way has highlighted a shift in student learning requirements towards a greater emphasis on what Boyer (1990) refers to as the scholarship of integration, where traditional boundaries between knowledge centres have become porous and the need for cross-disciplinary engagement has become paramount. For Boyer, the process of integrating knowledge from within a discipline; from without to within a discipline; and across disciplines are important scholarly activities. Philip Candy's interpretation of Boyer's claim for the value of integration from within a discipline also provides a useful description of the general value of integrative measures:

> in a post-modern world characterised by fragmentation and an over-abundance of information, such integration provides much-needed synthesis and offers a platform both for the conduct of further inquiry and for practical application of consolidated outcomes and insight.  

(Candy, 2000, p.273)

An example of this process can be seen in a recent essay by a first year Multimedia student in which the student explains the values of using blogs:
until recently my personal design process has been pretty simple but since joining this course I have had to write a blog, keeping it up to date with how my work is going and also write information I find that could be relevant to this subject area. This makes [the] reflective journal [portal] a useful referencing point and I must admit I do find myself on [the reflectivejournal.co.uk portal] before I come to do any work. …

As for its use as a referencing resource you can make a post of interesting information you find and use it as influence at a later date. You can also (and I probably will) post your experimentation on there, just because an idea did not work for one project does not mean it won't work, with a little more development, for another. [using an online journal in this way] is more a form of research. What I mean by this is you will not be designing any of your work on your blog but it is an incredibly useful starting point for any project.

(anonymous Multimedia student 2008b)

Understanding this shift to knowledge integration provides valuable insight into the changing requirements of university education. It helps to highlight the need for further support for students engaging in integrative theory-building processes.

The journals highlight the need for staff to intervene in order to affirm the pedagogic framework of the specific university undergraduate programme. It highlights the need for staff to actively engage through their support and guidance. The standard weblog comments system provides a useful mechanism for doing this where staff monitoring online journals are able to feedback to students through annotating posts. In this way students not only have an opportunity to receive commentary on their work but through engaging in this way are also implicitly guided into the cultural practices and discourse of the programme. The comments help to support a process of enculturation where students are ‘brought into’ the university. Evidence of this can be seen in the following views voiced by second year students commenting on the worth of minimalist approaches to art making. In this case the lecturer “jools” has intervened:
Providing this kind of support helps students to reframe their discussion in terms of critical thinking which Facione, Giancarlo, Facione, and Gainen, (1995) explain is central to the establishment of truthseeking, openmindedness, analyticity, systemacity, critical thinking, self-confidence, inquisitiveness and maturity in judgement. This is significant because intellectual capacity of this kind is recognised as being fundamental to the development of higher order thinking.

The online journals are able to function as a joint endeavour spanning multiple student cohorts. They provide a mechanism for students in one year of study to observe peers in their own cohort and peers in senior or junior cohorts. Having this perspective allows students to recognise common features. It helps them to participate in an evolving shared language of practice and enquiry where the nature of the interaction can be understood as a form of what Mikhail Bakhtin describes as a dialogic (Morris, 1994). This dialogic interaction fosters understanding and conceptualisation through an iterative process of agreement and
contestation. In this case it presents itself either explicitly in terms of blog comments or informally through student interaction and exchange.

Evidence of this can be seen in the following comments made by second year students congratulating one of their peers on the results of their design work:

6 Responses to “Animation Project Finished...”

Bill Says:
November 29th, 2008 at 10:53 am
Awesome work Kane! Loved the bullet time bit 😁

Phil Says:
November 30th, 2008 at 11:56 am
Truly epic Kane. Love it!

Danny Says:
December 3rd, 2008 at 11:20 am
dude, awesome, really sweet animation, don’t suppose you could gimme a hand with v-ray and lighting any time?
Danny

Rob Says:
December 8th, 2008 at 10:38 am
Sweet! nice work man!! mine is taking super long time to complete i think its gonna look really shite!! o well 😁

Toby Says:
December 17th, 2008 at 12:02 pm
I love the very simple knight's 😊 awesome animation! nice one

Ed Says:
January 29th, 2009 at 7:54 am
Dude did you get the London Symphony Orchestra to compose that piece for you. Brilliant concept, like the way its not full on war and they take their time trying to outdo each other. its like real war in Braveheart and stuff.

(anonymous Multimedia student 2008d)

Engaging in this way helps students to become what Ramsden (Marton, Saljo, 1984) described as “deep thinkers”. In this case, the significance of the recently created animation sequence is expressed through drawing connections between it and significant examples of popular culture such as The London Symphony Orchestra and the film Braveheart. It can also be seen as evidence of the emergence of what Gokhale (1995, p22) refers to as collaborative learning where students at “various performance levels work together in small groups toward a common goal”. In this case individual students work towards the production of common outcomes supported through the establishment of an ad-hoc collective of peers where the sharing of results help to establish collective and shared capacity.
Despite the value of engaging students in this way the logistics of monitoring such a collection of online journals are not without their issues. Instead of only needing to visit a single central site (as is the case with VLE’s) staff in this situation are now required to review the full set of journals just to maintain an awareness of student progress. As a solution for this problem the Multimedia staff have set up an RSS aggregator which automatically assembles a single centralised list displaying recent posts published to all student online journals. The aggregator collates RSS feeds that are automatically published by blogging software. Through this method students are able to retain their individual autonomy by maintaining their own journal while staff needing to review content are able to access a centralised and sorted list of available posts.

The use of online journals also reveals aspects of the tension between the organisational structure of The University and the notion that learning happens often “between the spaces”, as a result of “collisions” between the discrete educational units, the seminar, the workshop, the lecture, and not the educational units themselves. For Wenger learning happens as “a process of negotiated meaning, the experience … is not produced out of thin air” (Wenger, 1998). While the use of online journals helps to promote this kind of engagement is does so in contrast to the more traditional university educational model. By situating learning in this way students are able to rehearse themselves as Multimedia practitioners through a process described by Wenger as “participation and reification” which includes

the discourse by which members create meaningful statements about the world, as well as the styles by which they express their forms of membership and their identities as members.


Through publishing online journals students are able to rehearse their identity in a way that complements the traditional university educational model.

Through maintaining online journals NTU Multimedia students engage in a rehearsal process centring on design practice. They script their individual narratives as they contribute to the shared discourse about the nature of their field. Through assimilating and reflecting upon new knowledge in this way, they are able to participate in local Communities of Practice that act as vehicles for sharing and critiquing common practices. In doing so they become located within the broader network of symbolic exchange forging new opportunities for collaborating and establishing their own practice within the broader network of global interconnections.
References


