'Curation' as a new direction in digital literacy theory

Abstract:

This paper theorises the practices of curricular assignment writing. I approach the writing of assignments as an assemblage of digital literacies, emerging as learners use whatever tools – digital and otherwise – are to hand. Building on recent work in literacy studies, and using a sociomaterial approach, I theorise learners' complex digital literacy practices emerging through their assignment writing. Importantly, some practices are in contrast to the digital demands imposed by normative classroom culture and policies, and others are related to how learners manage multitudes of resources, online and offline. I subsequently advance new directions in digital literacy theory as drawn from the data. One such idea is 'curation' as a digital literacy practice. I argue that understanding curation as a digital literacy practice adds value to current debates in digital literacy and educational technology, especially as researchers apply a more critical and fine-grained lens towards practices with educational technology.

Introduction

The last two decades have witnessed a burgeoning research interest in the impacts of digital media on literacy practices (e.g. Ito 2010; Belshaw 2012) and on educational practices within Higher and Further Education contexts (e.g. Gourlay & Oliver 2013; Satchwell et al. 2013), with some research on how the former can impact and inform the latter (e.g. Jones & Lea 2008). The research reported on in this paper, based on Bhatt (2012; 2014), builds upon this line of research inquiry and combines the ethnographic lens of Literacy Studies (e.g. Barton & Hamilton 2000) and the theoretical sensibilities of actor-network theory (e.g. Latour 2005) to provide an account of the digital literacy practices of learners, emerging as they are engaged in classroom-based tasks. Digital literacy practices therefore become an analytic frame which takes account of the empirical activities related to the writing and how these are performed through the entangled relations between social and material actors mobilised into the writing of the assignments.

In this paper, I use the account as a basis to theorise specific aspects of the learners' digital literacy practices occurring in and through their assignment writing. I argue that the practices which emerge are in need of some extensive exploration and theorisation. This is because many of them are characterised by:

1) Practices which are in contrast to the digital expectations and demands imposed on the learners by normative classroom culture, formal teaching procedures and institutional policies on digital learning;

2) Highly complex and sophisticated strategies of managing and appropriating different stimuli and resources at once, with learners and teachers present alongside board instructions, handouts, Web-based algorithms, Websites, previous work, Facebook friends, etc. all to hand to inform task completion.

In this vein, I advance what I argue are new theorisations about digital literacies in education which, when taken together, shape a certain choreography of learner digital behaviour and practices during classroom tasks. These practices draw from their own worlds as they, in turn, enact the precarious yet 'black-boxed' world of assignment writing. In this paper I focus on 'curation' as one particular theoretical idea from my study and explore its emergence and importance as a practice of learner digital literacy. The aspect of curation, as I explore it, is highlighted and explored in light of the data, and presented as a way for educators, literacy researchers, and educational technologists to better understand the many elided and ephemeral practices of digital literacy that occur during academic task completion. I argue that these findings add value to current transdisciplinary debates and theories in the fields of learning with digital media and educational technology, especially as researchers attempt to apply a more critical and fine-grained lens towards technologised practices in education.

Research focus

Curricular assignment tasks are central to assessment processes and important moments not just for learners as they navigate their way through a course of study, but also for teachers, parents, and managerial staff who also have a stake in their successful completion. Assignment practices are bound up in different texts and a multitude of discourses, including economic imperatives, managerial efficiency, and quality assurance procedures (Tummons 2010). Taken together as sociomaterial assemblages, or 'actor-networks', these agencies give rise to a particular dominant conception of what an assignment actually is and how it should be completed; namely through the valourised 'literacies' that it is designed to assess.

Through the deployment of digital media and connectivity of Cyberspace, modern classrooms are porous environments. They, and the curricular tasks carried out within them, are crucial sites for the emergence of digital literacy practices. Overlaps, impasses, disjunctures and breakthroughs are key moments when practices of one kind (e.g. the *informal* and *social*) jostle with practices of another

kind (e.g. the *formally academic* and *curricular*). How practices of various sorts become part of the bricolage of learner strategies in the moment-by-moment completion of assignments then becomes an important context for research.

Digital curation

Drawing on this empirical examination, this paper highlights learners' practices of anthologising and mobilising of old content to produce new content. Deploying a reformulation of the traditional idea of 'curation', which derives from the Latin root *curare* ('to cure' or 'to take care of'), I argue that the learners' practices and processes of *anthologising*, *organising*, *collating*, and *judicious selecting* constitute a complex interplay of practices in need of theorising. Whilst the term curation has been applied to work that is usually carried out in museum settings, it has now evolved to describe what is often done in digital environments (Rosenbaum 2011). In this respect, prolific Web users make themselves effective digital curators by searching and locating information, then creating a new experience by re-contextualising it.

I end by discussing how pervasive curation practices of modern and digitally-equipped learners need to be better understood, educationally acknowledged, and harnessed for pedagogical purposes. An empirical examination of learners' assignment writing practices is one research-led starting point for this kind of inquiry.

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