# Rethinking Educational Technologies in the Age of Social Media: from ‘tools for interaction’ to ‘sites of practice’

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I'm going to talk around some ideas that my colleague Mary Lea and I have been developing through our teaching and research at the Institute of Educational Technology, and which we are publishing this year as a book called 'Challenging e-learning in the university – a literacies perspective'. This talk can only touch on a few of the themes that we have discussed, but I hope it will be enough to get you interested, so that you will read the book when it comes out in November. I will give you the details at the end of the talk. In the meantime, I have put the draft text of the talk on my website at this URL, where you will also find most of the references that I'm using.

Educational Technology encompasses all the technologies that are used to deliver, support or otherwise enable teaching and learning in schools and colleges, but in this talk I am going to refer specifically to what are still called 'new', or information and communication technologies, ICTs, in other words computers, and to their use in higher education. Why does this need rethinking? Because of the phenomenon of 'user-generated content' and the emergent **online social media**, and the paradox this represents for online learning in the university.

So what are the social media?


**Slide: Social Media**

This is a collage of screens from a few of the currently most-talked-about sites on the internet. You may be able to make out:

- Youtube – a website where people can display their efforts at creating videos, using digital cameras, mobile phones, webcams, etc. Reproducing clips that have been found on YouTube is rapidly becoming an easy way for the mainstream media to produce entertainment on the cheap and at the same time prove its hip credentials.
- Facebook - a site where people can create presentations of themselves and link to each others' pages for the purpose of sharing pictures, music, comment etc.
- Wikinews - a site where anyone can publish a news story, and edit the stories published by others.
- MySpace – another site where people can present themselves and their interests, and register their interest in each other.
- Delicious – a website where people can assemble links to information found anywhere on the internet, and label their collections of links with words and intuitive expressions called 'tags' which then become available to others to use for the purposes of searching for further related information.
- A blog – a kind of web diary or journal in which individuals or groups, in this case some of the staff of the Al Jazeera news network, can present their views, and invite the views of others. These are often supplemented by 'feeds' or automatically updated channels of information from external internet publishing sources.

There are many other websites of this kind, mostly free for anyone to use but with subtle differences in the facilities they offer and the audiences they appeal to. For an overview, I can recommend an article by Bryan Alexander in the journal Educause in March/April 2006 www.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/ERM0621.pdf

Collectively, websites such as these have started to be known as 'Web2.0' – a term coined by Tim O'Reilly in 2004 and rapidly developing buzzword status as it is promoted as a new paradigm in how to use the worldwide web for business, entertainment, education, government, and social communications in general.

We'll look at the characteristics of this new paradigm, and of the paradox for online learning a bit later.

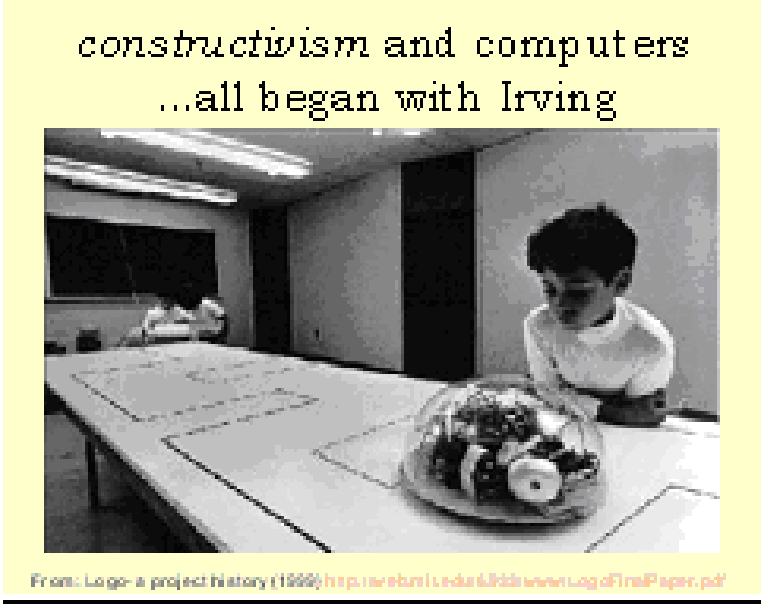
I have put these expressions, "**tools for interaction**" and "**sites of practice**" in my sub-heading in quotation marks, to indicate that these are **metaphors**. Metaphors are very useful for encapsulating the essence of a way of thinking about something. In this case, the first one – the metaphor of the computer as a 'tool' is a familiar one, but I am going to argue that, pedagogically, it is out of date. When a metaphor is out of date it can become an obstacle to understanding the thing it is supposed

to explain. The second metaphor –"sites of practice" is a less familiar one, it means we have to think about technologies as if they were *spaces* where social practices of different kinds, including institutionalised teaching and learning, go on. I will try to explain as I go on, what I mean by this, and why I think it is now a more useful way to think about educational technologies in higher education.

Here is how the explanation will go:

- Where the idea of the "tool for interaction" comes from – the contribution of social constructivist learning theory
- What is **wrong** with a learning theory based on the idea of online interaction
- Where the notion of "practice" comes from – communities and the literacy practices they develop
- What kinds of **social literacy** practices thrive in social media spaces, and what is wrong with it
- What kinds of educational practice are capable of integrating social media literacies?

So let us begin at the beginning…




**Slide: Logo**

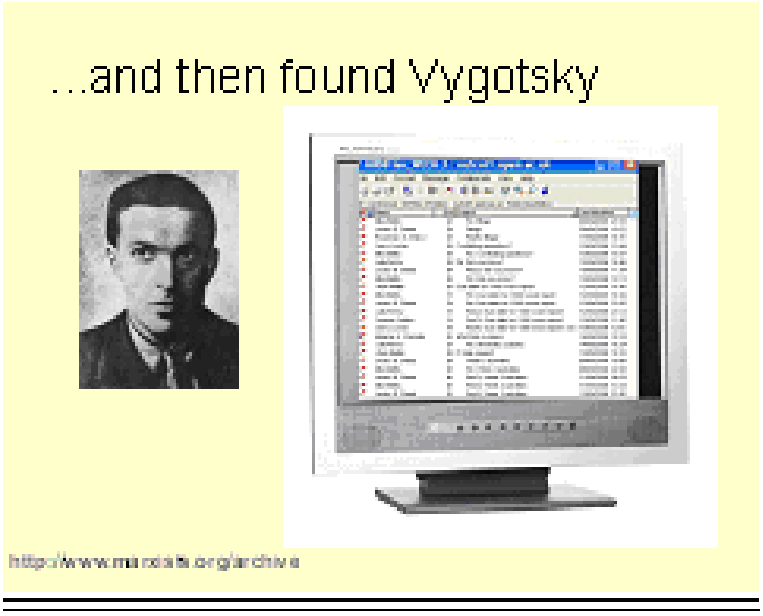
This is Irving – he has a lot to answer for, as he helped to popularise the metaphor of the '**mind tool**'. Irving, by the way, is the machine, not the child. Irving, who is otherwise known as a '**turtle**' was invented by Seymour Papert, who was probably the father of the metaphor of the computer as a tool for thinking. In the 1970s Papert developed an approach to teaching children mathematics, based on the exploration of a mathematical 'microworld' consisting of a robot device, called a 'turtle', controlled by a simplified computer program called Logo. Children could use Logo to enter instructions into the computer, and this would make the turtle move around and describe

geometrical shapes. Papert proposed that to make the conscious connection between the instructions given to the computer, and the physical shapes of the turtle's movement, was to experience a 'powerful idea' which once learned would itself become a building block for more and more complex conceptual structures. Such ideas he referred to as 'tools for thinking', a metaphor owed to the constructivist paradigm that many cognitive and developmental psychologists were working within at the time

But in the eyes of the computer-assisted learning enthusiasts of the 1980s, it was the machine itself that was the "tool". Technology came to be seen as a kind of **mental prosthetic** that enabled people to think faster, harder, more effectively than they could with their unaided brains. The metaphor of the computer as a "tool for thinking" was born.

In the 1980s and 1990s, there happened what Curt Bonk (from Indiana University) has called a 'revolution in learning theory', in which the socio-cultural learning theories of Vygotsky and others began to be applied to education. Vygotsky argued that thinking begins, not in the individual mind but in the relations between individuals. He is famous for the idea of the "zone of proximal development" – the metaphorical area of mental development that is available to us when we receive help from others who are more skilled than ourselves. Learning came to be seen as something that occurs through interaction – **'collaborative learning'** became the ideal.

So with the development of computer-mediated communication systems (what we call CMC) in the 1980s, constructivist learning theory became 'social-constructivist', and the metaphor was transformed. The computer became a "**tool for interaction**" and online collaborative learning began to underpin practice in online teaching and learning in universities (e.g. Jonassen et al 1993, Mason & Kaye 1989; Berge & Collins 1995; Bonk & King 1998) focusing on the promotion of group work and other forms of peer-to-peer interaction through which knowledge can be collaboratively constructed.

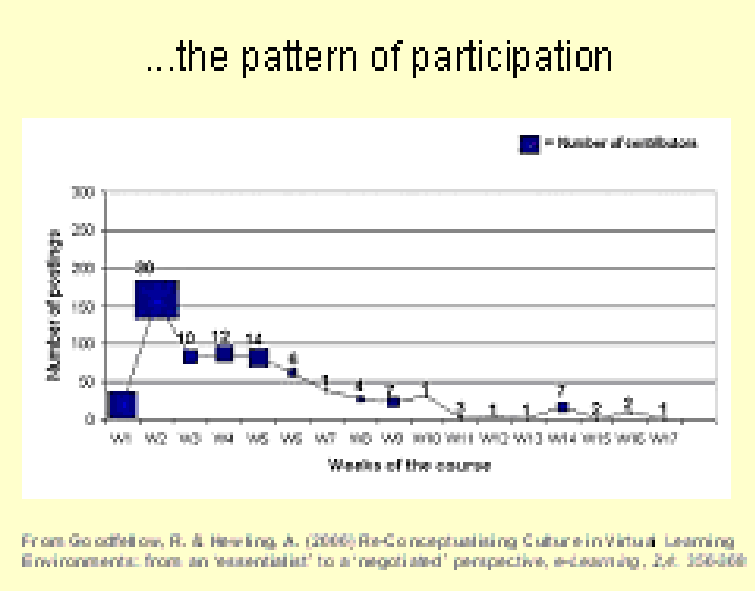



**Slide: online collaborative learning**

It is interesting that the educational discourses of the time are not only about pedagogical effectiveness, but also about the transformation and democratisation of higher education through technology. The pioneers of online learning set out to make a case for an overall paradigm shift in the purpose and structure of education based on social-constructivist and collaborative learning principles. The computer was to be the key tool in this transformation. A tool with which the interaction of participants can be guided and shaped by instructional designers, so that it eventually produces a certain kind of structured discourse which we call learning. As with Papert's approach of twenty five years earlier, the implication is that it does not actually need teaching intervention, nor even a body of accepted knowledge, only learners in interaction with each other and with the tool. Teachers are reduced to the role of moderators, or facilitators.

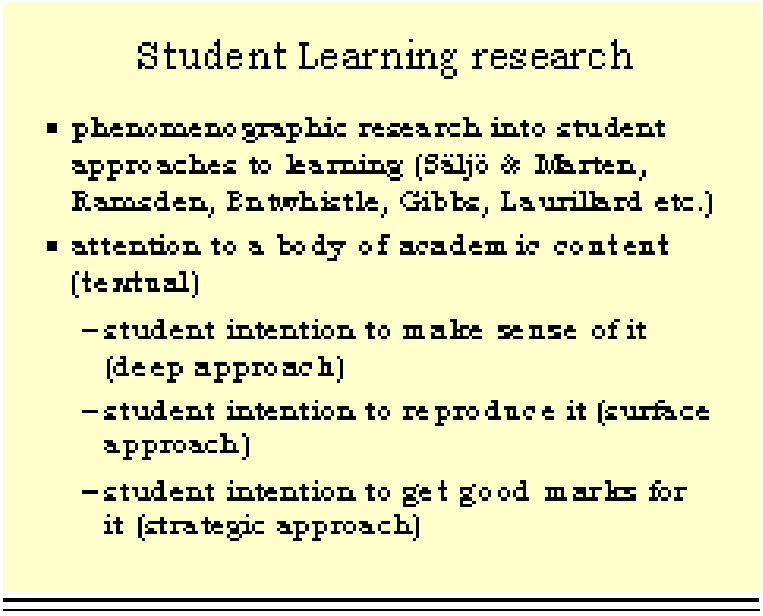
But we only have to look at the screen appearance of such 'knowledge construction' to see what is wrong with this idea. This is typically what it looks like on the surface, in most of the online discussion systems in use today. A list of message titles names and dates. No way of seeing what is being constructed. In fact no way of constructing anything except line by painstaking line! Online learning visionaries such as Linda Harasim from the University of British Columbia have sometimes claimed that the impact of CMC is of a similar order to that of the invention of the printing press. But remember that early printers had to set up their messages letter by letter, word by word. Well, online discussion with these systems sometimes seems a bit like that too! Despite the occasional claim in the CMC literature that students engaged in enthusiastic, lively discussion, accounts of actual practice in collaborative online learning seldom do justice to the idea that knowledge is being constructed simply through interaction. Now that the first flush of promotion of the pedagogical benefits of this technology is over, more and more accounts are emerging, of the difficulties of getting any but the most enthusiastic of students even to participate in this kind of

interaction, let alone to exploit it for the purposes of significant learning. If you have any doubt about this, look at the current widespread practice of linking participation to assessment. "You must contribute at least 5 messages in order to pass the course". Why would we need to say this, if we had an engaging and effective tool for interaction to offer them?




**Slide: Online participation**

This is a pattern of participation in online discussion that many of us will find to be typical. It comes from some research I did with online Masters in education courses. It shows the number of people contributing and the number of messages they post, over the period of one course. See how the initial enthusiasm wears off, just at the point where it should intensify, if the interaction itself is to produce anything significant in the way of learning or knowledge construction. Now, this is only one course, and I admit there are others where the pattern is different, and of course, a committed and energetic teacher can make a lot of difference. But I still argue that it is very uncommon to get a **majority** of students in a course interacting in computer conferences at any level, and this may be due to any number of reasons: intimidation caused by the permanence of written contributions, fear of criticism or of looking stupid, reluctance to criticise for fear of being impolite, feeling lost or too far behind the discussion, not having mastered the medium or specialist language, or simply being a 'freeloader'. The supposed benefits of online interaction are just not obvious to many learners, and there is little evidence to contradict the fact that some do just as well in their assessment tasks without participating in online discussion.




**Slide: Student learning research**

We cannot blame the learners! The conceptualisation of learning shared by many university students has been studied widely by researchers in the field of Student Learning. These researchers (Säljö & Marten, Ramsden, Entwhistle, Gibbs, Laurillard....etc.) have identified the centrality of a body of academic content, what we would call 'subject matter' or 'disciplinary content'. They have also identified different approaches that students adopt to learning it, characterised as 'deep' and 'surface', & 'strategic'. Note the focus on reading and writing and on assessment. These perceptions are deep-rooted, and continually reinforced by the practices of teachers and academics in institutions of higher education. They are what students **expect**.

But deep, surface and strategic approaches are largely absent in the way that online collaborative learning is presented to learners. The "tool for interaction" metaphor for learning technologies has led us away from thinking about content, and about conscious approaches to learning altogether – towards the more general perception of the online learning community, as a site where social interaction fosters a learning process analogous to the socialisation that goes on in communities which are physically located.

Learning in 'online communities' in educational contexts is supposed to be similar to learning in 'communities of practice' in the non-educational world, as described by Etienne Wenger and others. Communities of practice do not focus on bodies of content or on deep and surface or strategic approaches, or other kinds of academic practice. According to Wenger they form around 'mutual engagement in a joint enterprise where there is a history of communication'. But even where Wenger's conditions for a community of practice are met in actuality, there is still considerable doubt about the degree to which they can be recreated solely in online interaction.


**Slide: an online community of practice**

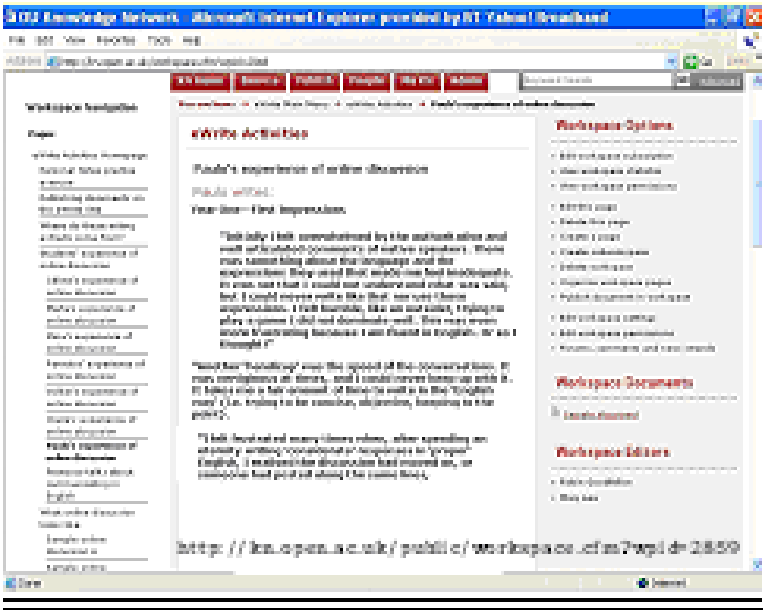
The UK National College for School Leadership has turned the 'community' metaphor into a brand! But whilst there are many active and interesting online discussions amongst groups who share practice at different levels of management of Britain's schools, there are certainly not 70,000 people interacting online! In fact many of its constituent 'communities' are sparse lists of occasional terse messages, looking much like the participation graph from a Masters course I have just shown you. The strength of the NCSL's virtual infrastructure is, in fact, as much in its enhancement of communication in physically-located local networks, such as the schools and colleges themselves. It is these communities that create the online interaction, not the other way round[1].

The "tool for interaction" metaphor has simply not provided either the insights into individuals' experience of learning, nor the remedies for lack of participation and failure to learn online, that might have been expected in the two decades or so that has passed since collaborative online learning was pioneered. Further, it has helped to perpetuate the image of virtual learning environments as socially and culturally sealed off from the situated lives of their participants.

But the social and cultural identities of online learners are always implicated in the ways in which they interact online. And, as sociologists such as Bourdieu and De Certeau have shown, social and cultural identities are both created and maintained and expressed through engagement in specific, recurring and socially-recognised ways of acting and communicating. These ways of acting and communicating are what I am calling 'practices'.

By far the most significant practices for educationists are those that are associated with reading and writing.

[1] See my paper on 'virtuality and the shaping of educational communities' for an elaboration of this argument: Goodfellow, R (2005) in Education, Communication and Information, Volume 5, Number 2, pp. 113-129.



**Slide: a student's 'voice'**

This is an extract from an interview with a student on one of our own Masters in distance education courses. The interview was one of several that we did in order to enable students, who are studying at a distance, to 'hear the voices' of other students on the same course. It is part of a website called the eWrite Site which we used for several years, until recently. It is now public and you can visit it at http://kn.open.ac.uk/public/workspace.cfm?wpid=3808. This learner comments particularly on his experience as a writer in the online spaces of the course:

> Initially I felt overwhelmed by the authoritative and well articulated comments of native speakers. There was something about the language and the expressions they used that made me feel inadequate. It was not that I could not understand what was said, but I could never write like that nor use those expressions. I felt humble, like an outsider, trying to play a game I did not dominate well. This was even more frustrating because I am fluent in English. Or so I thought!

The importance of recognising the textual nature of online interaction, its nature as WRITING, not simply as a static version of talk, is emphasised by these comments. It is not just language, it is language in textual, written form which has the specific power to construct success and failure in academic communication.

To demonstrate that it is not something that only affects non-native-speakers, here is a quote from another piece of research involving students on these courses, this time from a native-speaker:

> Like many others, I was, and still feel to some extent, reluctant to write to conference, considering a message to conference an 'act of publishing' rather than an act of speech … I'm often behind/out of sync with the coursework, and don't particularly want to let on, ie 'publish' my ignorance. This is particularly the case when the discourse is technical.
> [From: Goodfellow, R (2005) Academic Literacies and e-Learning: A critical approach to writing in the online university. *International Journal of Educational Research, 43,7-8*: 481-494]

This focus on the significance of written communication is the key to my argument that we need to see the educational technologies we use as "sites of practice".

To summarise so far:

- The "tools for interaction" metaphor does not reflect the realities of student participation in online learning communities
- The notion of “interaction” does not reflect the character of online academic communication as writing

…so let us now look at the character of academic communication, both on and offline, as writing…

In our book, Mary Lea and I argue that, despite recent moves to focus the 'business' of higher education on professional and occupational knowledge and skills, rather than on traditional academic subject areas, your reading and writing practices are still the most socially important markers of your education. What is more:

- learning in the university privileges permanent texts rather than ephemeral spoken encounters (witness the disappearance of oral examinations at most levels, except for doctoral vivas)
- new forms of knowledge; the development of new and web-based technologies has resulted in more - rather than less - writing and reading, more diversity and more variety in textual practices.

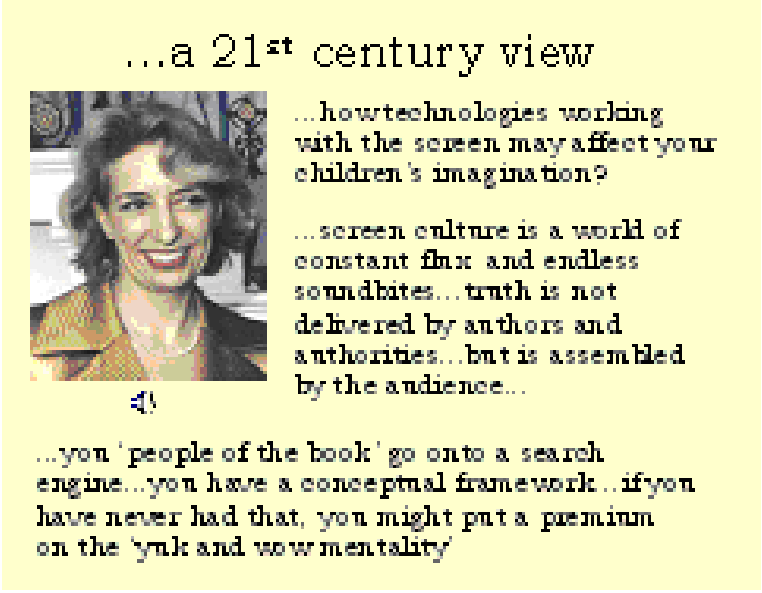
Since the advent of "universal literacy" reading and writing have born an enormous social importance in our cultures. In fact there have periodic 'literacy crises' when society feared that education was not doing its core job of teaching children to read and write. One of the most famous was in 1975 when Newsweek published an article with the title….


**Slide: Why Johnny can't write**

…the gist of this article was that the US education system was "spawning a generation of semiliterates" – people whose reading, writing and verbal skills were in steep decline, as shown by statistics from the Department of Health, Education and Welfare. Newsweek blamed this decline on television viewing and 'creative' teaching. The 'crises' implicated other educational, ideological, and technological issues which were not confined to the classroom. In the controversy that developed, there were politically-motivated attacks on '…liberals, intellectuals, immigrants and the irreligious, as well as criticisms aimed at TV and the IT industry' (Lankshear & Knobel 2003, pp.6-7). One consequence was the reinstatement in some colleges, of compulsory composition classes, which had been dropped after student protests in the 1960s.

Such public concern over reading and writing standards and the effects of new technological practices explicitly asserts the wider established values of a social hierarchy based on print communication. Brian Street has used the term 'ideological' to encapsulate the central role that literacies play in systems of social valuation and the negotiation of power relations (Street 1995, p.151). Ideologies, assumptions that directly or indirectly legitimise existing power relations, are often hidden in the language we use, masquerading as common sense or everyday talk. Literacy and the teaching of reading and writing is thus a form of cultural practice.

So let us now look at a 21st century view of 'book learning'…




**Slide: Susan Greenfield**

The British neuro-biologist and Peer Susan Greenfield gave a speech about future education policy to the House of Lords of the UK parliament in 2006 (Hansard April 20 2006) and a talk at Nottingham University 6 months later. She expressed considerable concern that new ways of processing information characteristic of the digital multimedia environments that children are increasingly exposed to online, might be adversely affecting basic cognitive abilities traditionally developed through reading, such as memory, imagination, and creativity.

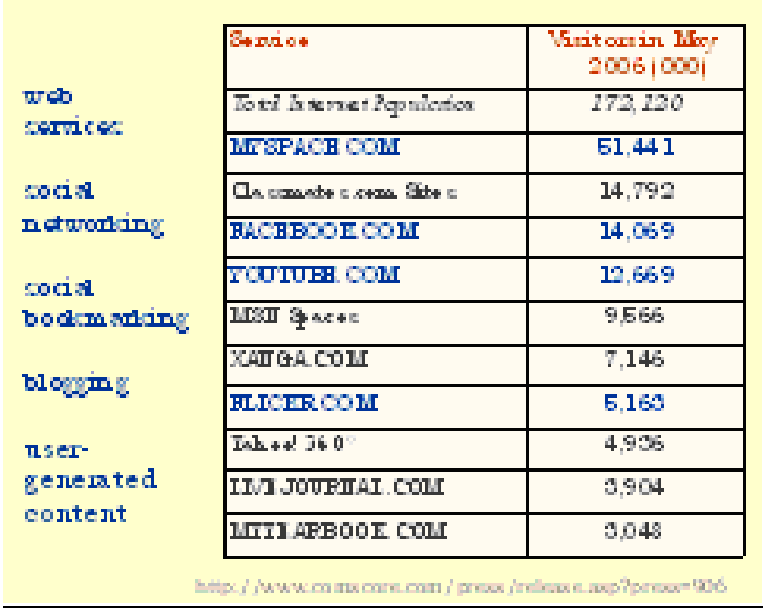
Greenfield believes that for children the experience of engaging with online multimedia is a 'yuk and wow' sensory experience, in which the child simply reacts at the emotional and sensate level, without being able to make any kind of narrative sense out of it. You and I, on the other hand, as 'people of the book' have trained our brains through reading and writing, so that we have a conceptual framework, and understanding of narrative, which we can use to understand the way that the information we receive online relates to us.

Greenfield does not say so explicitly, but she implies strongly that this is not just about the facility of imagination, but is a better, more educated way to deal with the online world. She invokes the modern equivalent of a literacy crisis – one in which people no longer read books, whose brains are different from ours, whose communication practices are unpredictable, and who are creating a society which has no place for the kind of education we value…

This is why we need to look carefully at the practices that new online social media environments are becoming sites for. As educationists our role is not merely to use the most up-to-date tools in our teaching – there are social values that we need to fight for too!

Not much systematic research has yet been done on the kinds of social practices that are developing in social media sites of communication, that have implications for education. I will mention a couple of projects that I know about, in my conclusion. But if we read the accounts that we find in the (traditional) new media, and if we observe for ourselves, we can see that there are general trends, and that they are happening on quite a large scale.

Examples of practices in the informal web include social networking (forming 'insider groups' who relate their tastes and activities to each others), bookmarking (sharing resources), blogging/diarising, and the creation and distribution of multimedia content of all kinds by users, through a generation of technologies called 'web services' that enable people to use the internet like a market place rather than as a mail-order system.




**Slide: Social media & Web 2.0**

The numbers of visitors show why these practices (commercial, journalistic, political, civic, as well as recreational) are considered so significant. A large proportion of these visitors are under the age of 25. This has given rise to the idea that there is a generation of '**digital natives**' who are particularly at home in these environments because they have been brought up with the technologies.

So what should be the response of educationists? Clearly, some have responded with alarm, and there are many examples of schools and local education authorities banning access to such sites in their classrooms. However, a more considered response sees these developments as part of a larger social change which calls for a new vision of the purpose and processes of education.

One group that has articulated a response to new communication practices are the Multiliteracies theorists who originated in Australia with the work of Cope and Kalantzis, Lankshear, Snyder and Green and others in what was called the New London Group, and whose ideas have been developed by Gunther Kress at the Institute of Education in the UK, with the 'design curriculum' (New London Group 1996, Kress 2003).

Very briefly, these educationists argue that the 'new communication order' points to the need for a change of emphasis in the curriculum. The design curriculum proposes:

- communication in the post-modern age undergoing a 'revolution'
- education reshaped by workplaces, markets, media, and lifestyle groups,
- no stable systems of knowledge and its representation
- learners' intentions to shape the social and cultural environment'
- critique is necessarily backward-looking

These are important ideas. But our own argument takes issue with the last 3 of these points, and this is what we have written about. I'll use the rest of the talk give you a summary of why we think that

critique still has a vital role to play in higher education, and why we need to develop research that applies a principled kind of critique, based on a recognition of the continued importance of written literacies, to the social practices of the new communication order itself.

First let me list some of the kinds of practices that we can observe developing in these online spaces:

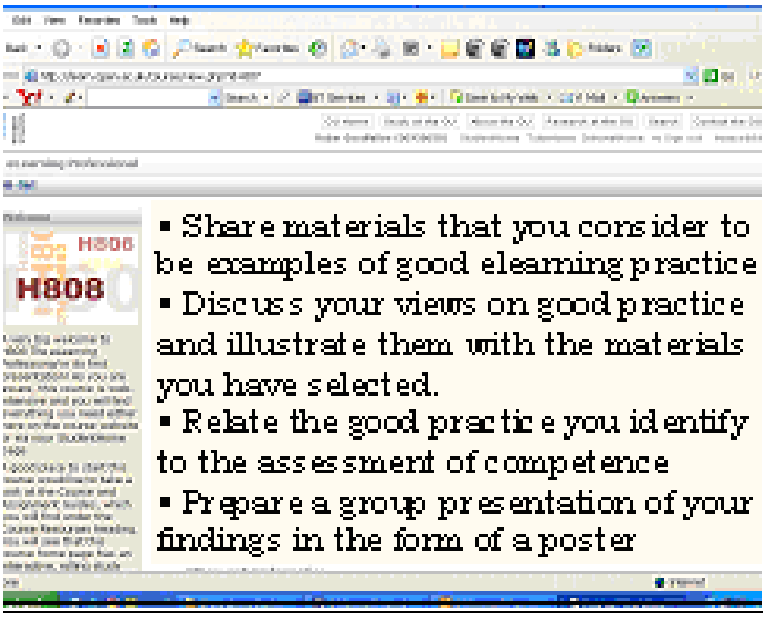
- Social media practices create a form of '**attention economy'** (Goldhaber 1997), in which people compete for audience, and gain social status in proportion to their success in attracting visitors to their pages.
- Advertisers and the news and entertainment industries use them for the promotion and distribution of products and the collection of market information. News Corporation, the owners of MySpace, for example, projected a revenue from advertising, share of royalties, sale of specific services etc. of $200m in 2006
- Mainstream media such as newspapers and broadcast TV use them as a resource for their own programming. YouTube, for example, on which people can publish homemade video content of all kinds, has been the focus of BBC TV shows.
- Pop music and TV stars use them to publicise themselves and their work amplifying the influence that these network have on contemporary popular culture.
- Practices such as the dissemination of jokey and trivial video clips, the posting of hoax 'news' stories, bullying and 'flaming' (abusing in electronic text), sexualising of images of young women, encourage other ephemeral and uncritical forms of social practice.

To give one example: research at Columbia university has shown (Salganik et al. 2006) that internet 'rating' of cultural products is as likely to generate an unconscious alignment with majority taste as it is to stimulate original forms of self-identification. In the competition for rankings of cultural content such as pop songs, for example, it is generally assumed that audiences will recognise quality in some products, according to their own tastes, and value these more than others which lack the same quality. The Columbia research showed that American teenagers downloading discussing and ranking new songs via social networking sites aligned their tastes to each others' in a way that did not ultimately relate to any objective standard of quality of the content. The researchers concluded that the demands of evaluating a large number of competing songs led the majority of the teenagers to attend only to those that others had already rated.

It is not that such 'herd' behaviour is all that happens on the social media sites, as there is clearly a great deal of constructive and creative user content-generation going on. However, now that the social media technologies are becoming increasingly normalised and accessible, the equal facility with which they may be used to perpetuate practices that are at best conformist and at worst

trivialising or even oppressive, suggests that the scope they offer for the re-shaping of the social and cultural environment may be more limited than the multiliteracies theorists acknowledge.

This, in our view, is strong argument for maintaining a focus on critical practice in higher education, and applying it to our own engagement with social media technologies. Let me consider some of the implications of a 'sites of practice' view as applied to our own teaching context at the Institute of Educational Technology.




**Slide: 'the e-learning professional'**

This is the website of an online course in our Masters in Online and Distance Education programme: "The e-Learning Professional". This is an e-portfolio course. E-portfolios have been called 'e-learning 2.0' by Stephen Downes and are the flavour of the month with many university technical managers, but many of our students come to the course without any previous experience of either e-portfolios or online learning, and some of the teachers have never worked with e-portfolios before.

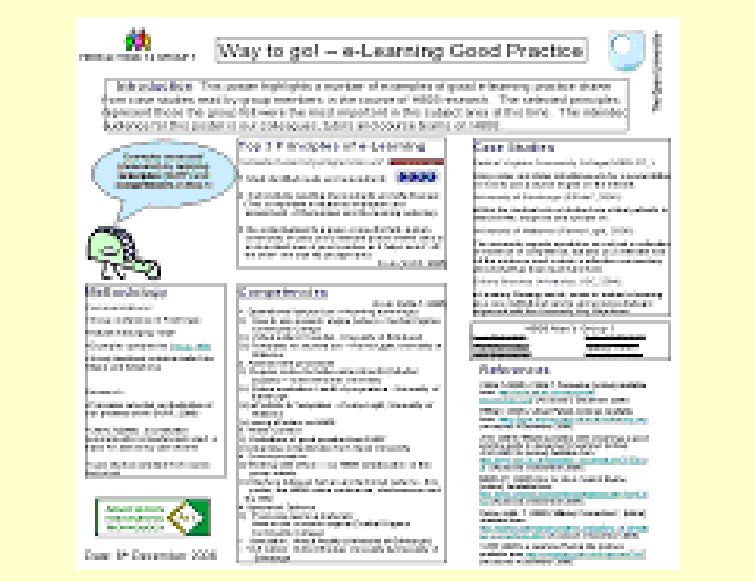
Our primary concern is not the e-portfolio or the other technologies used in the course, but the **literacy practices** that these e-learning practitioners engage with when they use e-portfolios, social media and other manifestations of Web 2.0 for learning.

To explain what I mean, I'll give you an example of a group task that students on this course are asked to carry out, online.

- You will be allocated to a group of about six students and should share materials, selected from the resources provided for Weeks 13 and 14, that you consider to be examples of good elearning practice. You can organise your group in any way you choose; for example, in choosing who should upload your final presentation.

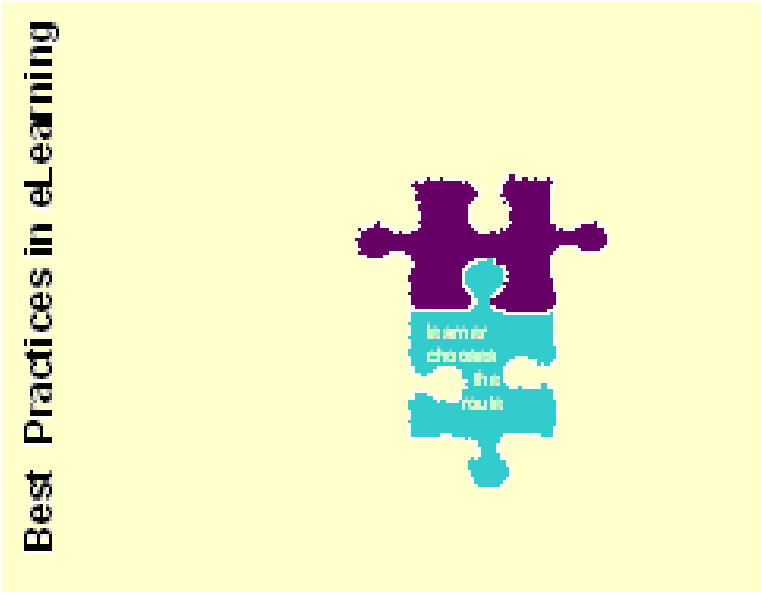
- Discuss your views on good practice and illustrate them with the materials you have selected. Relate the aspects of good practice you identify to competencies and the assessment of competence. A sub-conference will be set up for each group.
- Prepare a group presentation of your findings in the form of a poster (by using PowerPoint, for example). Each group should make their presentation available in the conferencing system to the full cohort.

I'm going to show you the posters produced by two of the groups, after engaging in discussion in conferences and on the course wiki. The groupwork process itself was similar for both groups. Most people took some part, before one or two dominant people took control of the output process. The outputs were later presented in everyone's individual e-portfolio as evidence of their own professional development. This presents the markers with a problem – do they assess the design only? Or do they look for academic/critical content?




**Slide: Group 1 poster**

This poster is a straightforward example of a contemporary academic literacy practice – the research poster. It is writing-intensive, covering some of the course topics in detail: principles, case studies, competencies, references, methodology etc. However, there is no obvious critical content, ie: there is no *discussion* of these topics, simply the re-representation of the issues as they appear in the websites and other resources that the group has drawn on. Nevertheless there is scope in this poster for a tutor to award marks based on its content, eg: the 'top 3 principles of e-learning', selection of case studies, the use of corporate logos without permission, etc. The design too can be criticised – it is cluttered, very texty, with an unimaginative use of fonts etc. In short there is something here that represents the product of group interaction in a way that can be deconstructed for a teacher to mark, and it is conceivable that individuals in the group could receive different marks, depending on the nature of their contribution to this product.




**Slide: Group 2 poster**
(nb: this is an animation – the jigsaw pieces assemble themselves while we watch)

In contrast, here is an example of what I would call a contemporary social media literacy practice – a simple multimedia statement, animation-intensive, attention-grabbing, engaging, punchy, encapsulating one or two simple ideas. It has very little writing, and even less critical content (discussion of the issues) than group 1's poster, and although it would get top marks for imagination and presentation, it can't be evaluated as a product of the group's interaction on the course, as it is very light on *content*. It also can't be deconstructed for marking purposes, as there is no evidence of individual or collective contribution. As an academic literacy practice relevant to this particular task it is inappropriate.

So which poster engages with the true content or the spirit of a course called 'the e-learning professional? Which one evidences deep learning? Which one would work best in a portfolio, as evidence of a trajectory of development? I'm not going to try and answer these questions now, but you might imagine that the debate around them still goes on in the course and tutor team.

Another example of the kinds of literacy practices that are developing in the online sites of this course, and the problems they create for the assessment of the *academic* nature of the processes involved, can be found in a podcasting task discussed on the course wiki.


**Slide: Student podcasts**

The wiki is a online 'page' where anyone can write or overwrite what is already there. In non-educational contexts, wiki-practices are still developing, the most well-know is Wikipedia, of course, but they are also used for project documentation and collaborative writing of various kinds. The task here was to provide evidence of ability to learn about a new piece of educational technology by creating a podcast and listening & commenting on others' podcasts. The students try out making their own podcasts on some subject related to e-learning, and present them for comments by the community. The wiki presentations and interactions are typically chaotic and multimodal, sometimes consisting of short one-line exchanges, sometimes of longer self-presentations. Contributions are sometimes named, sometimes anonymous, sometimes with pictures, often with embedded links to blogs and to the podcasts and feeds.

Much of the 'talk' is quite technical, addressing issues around the software they have used for their podcasts. But there is a distinctly 'insider' register to some of the contributions. This tends to foreground the task community itself as the audience for this content, rather than the teachers or other representatives of the official course.

Here is an extract from one of these podcasts, in which the role of the informal community is made explicit. Remember that these are distance learners and have never met face-to-face.

*(Audio clip)*

She is clearly reading from a written script  but she has an intuitive feeling for voice communication, borrowed from radio speech genres. This, and the informality of the topic, attracted comments from other students, where many of the more 'serious' talks on e-learning went unremarked. One of them said it was better than the Archers!

As the podcast goes on, she goes through the members of her immediate community – her tutor group – giving her impressions of them. Impressions based entirely on their communications via the

various textual media of the course. As she gets into her stride, her humour and attention to the particular audience of her tutor group become even finely tuned, as she jokes about her visualisations of these people she has never met.

I offer this an example of social-media-influenced user-generated content. It contrasts with the more course-oriented topics that many other students chose, not to mention their considerably less polished delivery. Of course it is possible that this student really is a radio actor in her day job! And there were other examples of excellent podcasts that adopted a more lecture-like register. But the point remains that this particular user exploited both the medium and its background social context in a manner very similar to the users of social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace.

But if we now ask how these social media literacies relate to classroom and professional practices, a much less coherent picture emerges. For instance, this student refers to her own background as an e-learning practitioner, but the chatty style of her talk and the social nature of its topic are more indicative of broadcast-media practice than teaching and learning. If this particular podcast were to be included in this student's portfolio of evidence of e-learning professionalism, how would it be assessed? As evidence of e-learning practice or simply of her ability to make a humorous podcast?

## Summary

Educational Technologies are sites of literacy practices, in which...

Academic practices (critique, assessment, publication, debate, etc.) interact with Professional & Occupational practices (reflection, collaboration, design) & with Recreational & Social practices (blogging/diarising, social networking).

Understanding our use of educational technologies as **design** does make it more manageable when faced with an increasing diversity of students and technologies, but I would argue that understanding it as **practice** is essential if we are to encourage the development of students' ability to **critique** as well as to communicate - this is a crucial function of higher education in a world of rapid and self-serving change.

The questions most needing to be asked, about how we should use technologies for teaching and learning, are no longer informed by theories of cognitive development, or models of collaborative knowledge construction. They arise instead from a recognition that e-learning technologies have taken their place, along with a great diversity of other social and cultural factors, as sites in which practices of 'doing university work' are carried out. In particular, they are sites in which linguistic communication goes on, predominantly in writing, in the service of relations of authority amongst participants.

Research into students' use of social media is an important focus for the questions we need to formulate. As Bayne & Land put it in their project, 'Putting Web 2.0 to work: new pedagogies for new learning spaces', funded by the UK Higher Education Academy:

> …changed patterns of participation, responsibility and discernment ask the higher education community to engage with some far-reaching challenges relating to the literacies, pedagogies and assessment practices we bring to bear in these new digital spaces, and to the organisational contexts within which they are embedded.

In our own book (Goodfellow & Lea 2007) we explore an alternative framework for understanding the role of technologies in education, based on a view of teaching and learning as social practice. To help us make sense of the coming era of large-scale online social networking, multimodal meaning-making, blurring of boundaries between learning and working, user-generated content, the 'attention economy'.

We take account of the deep historical and cultural association of the academy with the privileging of the written text and the fact that the institutional practice of being a student is still dominated by reading and writing texts, despite the fact that many of these are digital, hybrid and multimodal and open to manipulation in ways which have not been possible in the past.

Using a social literacies perspective we examine the policies and practices of e-learning in the university and expose issues that we believe need to be addressed if we are to reconcile the traditional disciplinary focus of teaching and learning in higher education with the twenty first century demands of the professional curriculum, lifelong learning, and new media practices.

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