

Digital literacies: competing discourses and practices in higher education

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Abstract—These instructions give you guidelines for preparing papers for the New Media, New Literacies, and New Forms of Learning workshop. The final version of your paper will be reformatted by the workshop organizers. Your abstract should be approximately 150 – 200 words, typed in 10pt font; please do not cite references in the abstract..

THE PROBLEM UNDER DISCUSSION

This paper offers a think piece around the different epistemological positions hidden within the ubiquitous use of the term ‘digital literacies’. It argues that we need to engage explicitly in the competing discourses and textual practices in this arena, in order to unpack the approaches to teaching, learning and knowledge that are embedded implicitly in its use. It suggests a framing for asking questions about the potential for groups of practitioners to work collaboratively and generatively together in order to support learning in a digital age but also points to tension and inherent difficulties in such a project. In so doing it suggests that terminology is frequently used uncritically and that few of us pay much attention to interrogating our own presuppositions about the meaning of terminology, which drive our practice. This is particularly the case in a fast moving, educational practice-based environment, where we are not building on established knowledge practices with a long disciplinary history. As a consequence, our assumptions and beliefs about our work and the implications of these for what we do in practice may differ markedly, even though on the surface we appear to be using the same language. This paper is primarily a discussion piece; it may be seen as somewhat polemical but hopefully offers a way forward so that we can talk across different practitioner contexts and boundaries.

DISCOURSES OF THE DIGITAL IN HIGHER EDUCATION

During the last decade, there has been increased attention to and focus upon learning in a digital era. One of the terms that has emerged strongly through usage in this context is the term digital literacies. There is clearly a tendency for the alignment of ‘digital’ with ‘literacy’ to come to stand for general capability in and beyond higher education. As Goodfellow (2011) argues, when used in association with the ‘digital’, literacy becomes shorthand for competency or generalised skill. In the specific context of higher education, rarely does the association of ‘digital’ with ‘literacies’, signal either a critical agenda around teaching and learning or align with the more critical and transformative perspectives of ‘literacies as social practice’ researchers in the tradition of the new literacy studies. Indeed, the literacies of ‘digital literacies’ in higher education appears to have a rather tenuous connection to research on academic literacies more

generally and often makes little attempt to build on that body of critical literature (Lillis & Scott 2007; Lea 2008; Russell et al 2009). As Goodfellow suggests, there is a mismatch between this critical and cultural view of literacy and technologically driven agendas. Across higher education the term has become associated with a whole range of different agendas and approaches. These can be descriptive and/or prescriptive, concerned with empirical research led agendas or more pragmatic considerations, offering transformative and critical approaches to teaching and learning in digital contexts or providing students and academics with a set of transferable skills and competences they can use in both the university and in the workplace. The result of this diversity is a relentless clash of discourses. A recent ESRC Seminar Series 'Literacy in the Digital University' attempted to provide a space for learning technologists and literacies researchers to explore the potential for bringing together different agendas concerning literacy in the digital university (<http://literacyinthedigitaluniversity.blogspot.com/>).

In part in response to these seminars, this paper asks whether different understandings and imperatives can ever be made to work together generatively or whether they will always be speaking across a divide. In order to explore this further, I have been unpacking some of the assumptions around work in higher education which aligns the digital with literacies. My intention has been to explore the presuppositions which underpin our practice and the implications of these for understanding different approaches to literacies in a digital higher education.

DESCRIPTIVE AND PRESCRIPTIVE

The last decade has seen a significant development in the field of learning technologies with the development of digital literacy/ies at its core (Beetham et al 2009; JISC 2011a; JISC 2011b). The orientation of this work is predominantly to offer descriptions of 'good' practice from institutional contexts (see Beetham et al 2009). However, there is also an overriding tendency towards prescription, which is often associated with significant agendas for change at an institutional level. This is particularly evident in the work commissioned by JISC (JISC 2011a & JISC 2011b). One dominant approach has been to align literacies with capability agendas and issues of institutional change, which are inscribed in discourses of the digital in terms of teaching and learning. These are frequently presented in terms of what should or must be done to ensure institutional change:

The approach being proposed is making learning development an explicit concern of teaching staff in fostering digital scholarship and digital professionalism, linked to changes in teaching practice. p.7

...realigning reward structures around innovation in learning and teaching.....supporting flexibility, stakeholder-

responsiveness, and innovation in curriculum design. p.8

..in changing cultures of learning to place greater value on 'literacies of the digital', institutions must engage and motivate students to develop learning literacies. p.10

In supporting those capabilities, support staff and curriculum teams must... p.66

...engage staff in rethinking their practice. p.71

(Beetham et al., 2009)

Approaches such as those exemplified in the quotes above chime with concerns raised by Bayne and Ross (2007) about positioning teachers in deficit with regard to the use of technologies in the curriculum and a concomitant lack of attention to disciplinary or subject-based knowledge, in both traditionally academic and professional domains. But where does such an approach come from? What are its epistemological roots and why does it mirror deficit models of student learning so closely? Why are approaches such as those exemplified above so quick to judge teachers rather than build bottom up from what teachers actually do? Why is there often little attempt to start from actual practice rather than rhetorically position university teachers as unskilled 'immigrants'? My interest here is in whose interests are being served by these discourses and the forms of textual practices which support them. The stance, examined above, offers little sense of provisionality or enquiry around the agendas being espoused, with the focus on an assumed need for implementation and change. Encapsulated in this vision is a move away from disciplines towards, "emerging and mixed methods, interdisciplinary problem spaces and a curriculum which is continually modified by the impacts of technology in the environment." P.67 (Beetham et al 2009). Although in some senses the vision is one of transformation, this is not given in relation to existing practice but suggests a top down approach to changing practice, with engagement with the digital being the main driver. This is aligned with broader economic and societal structures and a vision of technological change and digital futures.

With an overriding concern with developing practice, and in particular teacher and student practices, any implicit theoretical framing is not generally brought to the fore in these debates. Where this does happen, a common approach is to invoke a wide range of conceptual work which is then brought into service in relation to change and development, including different conceptions of literacy/ literacies, for example, information literacy, media literacy, digital literacy. The provenance of these contrasting fields of study and their epistemological basis is frequently left unexamined. This follows similar approaches in earlier

debates around learning and technologies with regard to 'learning design' (see, Conole 2006) and 'communities of practice' (for critique, see Lea 2005). What is of particular interest is how particular conceptual and theoretical frames are taken up and used, often with little attention to their more critical and enquiring perspectives. For example, an over-reliance on the use of schemas and inventories rarely reflects adequately the complexity of the work on which they are based.

RESEARCH LED

In contrast, the empirical approach to literacies in a digital age has a strong research focus that sits within established disciplinary frameworks and as such speaks into rather different agendas. Its close association with and development from new literacy studies (Street 1995; Barton 1996; Gee 1996) and academic literacies (Lea & Street 1998; Lillis & Scott 2007) links it directly with critical work on learning, identity and meaning making (Mann 2008). A major concern is with issues of representation and semiotic resources (Ivanic et al 2009). The focus on context is of primary concern; the digital is conceptualised within this broader social and cultural context and, consequently, there is much less attention paid to the technologies per se. Following Street (1995) there is an underlying concern to avoid foregrounding mode, medium and/ or particular affordances. This is coupled both with caution, about making claims with respect to the power of the digital in changing practice, and also taking participants' own practices as the starting point, examining how these are evolving and changing. The literacies framing acts more as a heuristic- a way of understanding what is happening in any institutional context - and building from there as its starting point. (Lea & Jones 2011; Williams 2009; Mc Kenna (forthcoming)). This enables us to view change from from a disciplinary and historical and cultural, perspective, implicitly valorising the disciplinary specialist, with disciplinary knowledge making practices in their broadest sense at the heart of the university. The interest of researchers is in the interaction between texts and practices around the digital and what they can tell us about individual and institutional practice and what the implications of this might be for understanding learning in ever changing contexts. Although the research takes account of the broader societal context, researchers are likely to be resistant to supporting a vision of the university in the digital age as primarily serving the needs of the knowledge economy.

PRAGMATIC CONCERNS

What I term a pragmatic discourse is evident in the work of those who are concerned with developing guidelines for practical design e.g. Leeds Met
(http://www.leedsmet.ac.uk/Embedding_Digital_Literacy.pdf)

It addresses a different sets of questions from either of the approaches examined so far and is primarily

concerned with offering practical support and guidance for embedding digital literacy as a skill, what one institution refers to as a graduate attribute http://www.leedsmet.ac.uk/Embedding_Digital_Literacy.pdf This perspective is encapsulated in the belief that digital literacy is a set of capabilities, fundamentally underpinned by ICT skills:

Digital literacy has become an essential life skill, which – if absent or underdeveloped – becomes a barrier to social integration and personal development (Shapiro, 2009). The term ‘digital literacy’ is widely used and arguably has as many different working definitions. A well- established definition is that used by the European Commission:

“Digital Literacy is defined as the confident and critical use of ICT for work, leisure, learning and communication.”

More recently, Stergioulas (2006) defined digital literacy as:

“... the awareness, attitude and ability of individuals to appropriately use digital tools and facilities to identify, access, manage, integrate, evaluate, analyse and synthesize digital resources, construct new knowledge, create media expressions, and communicate with others, in the context of specific life situations, in order to enable constructive social action; and to reflect upon this process.” p.4 http://www.leedsmet.ac.uk/Embedding_Digital_Literacy.pdf

In contrast to an empirical research led literacies approach - concerned with understanding practice and the meanings that these invoke for the different participants involved - the pragmatic approach offers practical advice and guidelines for the implementation of digital literacy, usually within the curriculum. Refocusing course content and delivery requires subject specialists to take practical steps and undertake a range of activities to align their existing practice with digital agendas.

TRANSFORMATIVE AND CRITICAL

We can see elements of transformative and critical approaches to practice running throughout the three approaches summarised above. What makes for difference are the contrasting approaches to transformation, particularly with respect to whose interests are being served and who appears to have control over the supposed transformation of practice; in short what is at stake in terms of critical practices of knowledge making? The notion of transformation clearly encompasses a range of meanings and potential practices. The more prescriptive, visionary approach calls for change at the very heart of historical university practice. Its vision is outwards into the economy and the workplace, inculcating gradueness in a digital

world and rewarding academic staff, not for disciplinary excellence but for their compliance with the vision of a 'digitally literate organisation' (JISC 2011b). This appears to contrast markedly with the empirical research led discourse taking a critical lens to practice and offering what could be called a slow transformation, increasing our understanding of how knowledge making practices and the processes of meaning making are being recast in digital spaces (Williams 2009; Lea & Jones 2011).

CONCLUSION

If we were to take a literacies perspective to our own texts and practices, in what ways might we make our own discourses more visible in order to work productively together? For literacies researchers, informed by critical language studies, applied linguistics and social anthropology texts and practices are not just incidental (Fairclough 1992; Blommaert 2005). They embed ideologies and ways of viewing the world; and if we want to understand competing and often colliding approaches to practice then we are obliged to make these discourses and practices visible and to lay bare their provenance. The main argument of this think piece is that, in an environment where people are working together on overlapping and collaborative agendas- as is evidenced in this particular event, which is bringing us together here at the Institute of Education - then we need to unpack and make visible our assumptions and conceptual understandings. Unravelling presuppositions, beliefs and features of the dominant discourses in which we engage can help us to understand our own professional and disciplinary priorities. This includes interrogating the assumptions on which we base our own work, understanding whose interests our work is serving and how these interests play into the professional and disciplinary discourses that we inhabit and the implications of these for our practice. This is crucial in terms of enabling education to "embrace its own interdisciplinarity and draw on the strengths of related professional and scholarly fields" (Beetham et al 2009) but also requires careful examination of its different conceptual and theoretical underpinnings, if we are to do more than act in the service of economically driven agendas.

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