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Making and remaking the self through digital writing

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I wanted to explore how a cohort of university students used digital spaces creatively to construct self-representations. Digital environments offer not only different time/space relation - ships but also a rich culture for play and identity performance. Play is now (re)acknowledged by educators as important to problem-solving, imaginative exploration, and identity formation. Online identities in video games have become a particular focus for identity play (Gee). Crucial to performance of identity, as well as situated literacy practice, are the notions of purpose and audience. These concepts framed my exploration, particularly in relation to what the students chose to communicate, and how they created such interpretations.

Identity

Asking young people to represent themselves in a shared, online space invited students to extend their everyday digital practices around self-representation. The popularity of Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and so on reflect forms of self-curation. Users build virtual profiles of themselves designed specifically to communicate with others in particular ways. Although forms of expression are constrained by site architecture, Web 2.0 has dramatically expanded opportunities for experimenting, composing, and networking personal profiles. Updating Prensky's images of "natives" and immigrants," David White calls young people who have only known post-Internet life "residents," while those over 30 are seen as "visitors".

Underpinning these questions lie further questions in relation to young people, identity and self-representation: how do they construct versions of themselves for others to read? What counts for them in terms of impressions of how they would like their peers to view them?

Rob Cover states that digital technologies provide potential for a range of representations of self. Drawing on Judith Butler, he conceptualizes identity (and, here, the writing of identity) as an ongoing process of becoming; a series of performative acts. We search to establish coherence across this "moving target" (Smith and Watson 71). "Coherence" requires "a matrix of identity categories, experiences, and labels" (Butler 40) that, through repetition, lend the illusion of an inner identity core (Butler 12). It is here that Potter's concept of curation becomes salient as a metaphor to capture the process of attempting to fix and communicate an identity.

In digital culture, curating is, in its most sophisticated form, about organizing how these different resources work intertextually [author's italics] to make meanings and that this is a new practice,

resulting from human agency in the changed social arrangements, practices, and artifacts of the new media. (cf. Lievrouw and Livingstone 2)

Potter links the processes of “collecting, distributing, assembling, disassembling” (xvi) to forms of digital self-representation. The extensive popularity of social media attests to the investment young people make in these “affinity spaces” (Gee).

One aim of the task interaction was, on my part, to push students into a less comfortable space. This space was created through their need to learn new media skills, and critically reflect on the capacity of technology to shape their processes, as well as the choices they needed to make to characterize themselves for a particular audience. I wanted students to reconsider and move beyond habituated practices often associated with learning and teaching.

The study

The study involved one graduate Education cohort, comprising twenty-three students. The university cohort drew from a culturally diverse mix of local applicants, most of whom were in their early twenties. The data collected included the students’

- written letters of introduction,
- their digital presentations to the class
- and their critical reflections.

The **handwritten** introduction was to be addressed to me, the lecturer, while the digital introduction was uploaded into a shared online space, to be viewed and commented on by peers. Hence, identities in play via the letters and digital texts were shaped further, not only by modalities but by audience awareness.

Following the construction of the two introductions,
and with a view to encouraging students’ understanding of literacy dimensions of the writing, they were asked to critically reflect on the practices and technologies involved.

If the digital offers new forms of discursive practices, I aimed to investigate whether, and to what extent, students, and by implication teachers, could exploit such potential.

Findings

The written introductions to me covered student-perceived strengths and weaknesses in terms of literacy skills, reading histories, and so on. They varied in detail and control of written features: syntax, vocabulary range, tone, and register choices.

Among those who considered the modal differences between the written and digital introductions were interesting “confessions.” Handwriting had become a significant challenge to many students after years of digital writing, and a number admitted to struggling to recreate cursive script (despite the fact, as teachers of young children, they would have to teach handwriting as a skill). Some students wrote the draft of their letter first on a computer, then transposed the draft to paper. This suggests student comfort with digital technologies that

reverses early practices with computers.Here, the handwriting is the “publication” while the computer is the primary composing tool.

The digital introduction content ranged from limited, in terms of exploitation of form, to rich and boundary-pushing.

At the limited end, five presentations used the task as a kind of digital scrapbook, posting photos of friends, family, and pets, following a linear chronology from baby to university student, occasionally supported by a favorite music track. The visual and audio resources in these cases mimicked print resources of self-representation: they tended to be linear in structure, rely more strongly on written text, and draw upon known conventions such as photo albums.

Others grouped aspects of their lives in Prezi frames, but explored none of the 3D potential of Prezi as a presentation tool. While it was possibly new software for many students, little had been made of online samples of Prezi being used effectively as an alternative to PowerPoint. Knowledge and use of visual grammar elements were limited. Although some had considered sequencing their narratives, transitions were often absent or clunky, with abrupt endings.

Other students, however, produced conceptually and visually compelling introductions. Their program range included iMovie, Prezi, Photostory 3, Movie Maker, PowerPoint, Google Earth, YouTube, etc. suggesting many students took on the teacher directive to extend their expertise. In most cases, music was added and acknowledged, reflecting the personal associations with the chosen song.

Some students consciously mixed the analogue and digital.

Ollie filmed himself sitting on his bed, looking deadpan at the camera while he flicked through piles of paper-printed photos reflecting aspects of his life. The lighting was (deliberately?) poor as he nonchalantly showed us travel and family photos and closed, wielding a neon Star Wars lightsaber.

James was filmed from waking to sleeping, engaging in a series of banal and self-deprecating events, such as learning to turn the Google sign around the right way on the computer screen. His travels, a much referred to event in students’ lives, consisted of him flying a cut out paper plane over a print map of the world.

Some students played with the notion of self and how much to reveal or keep distant. Amy filmed people talking about her and talking as her—at no point did she ever either appear or disclose anything substantive about herself. Employing documentary and vox pop techniques, Tom edited clips of his family and friends discussing him posthumously, with one brother struggling to remember he had even existed (but could he now have his room).

Koh from Singapore constructed an on-screen digital jigsaw puzzle with his name written in the centre section. Other digital pieces contained hyperlinked identity features (a Google map link to

his street, satay recipes, a trailer to a favorite television series). Clicking and dragging the irregular pieces to the centre piece completed his jigsaw, which formed a map of his own country, with his name at the centre.

Liam filmed himself in profile, speaking intermittently. He then stood opposite his interactive screen profile and conducted a conversation with himself as postmodern subject—a playful, decentered expression of authorial voice

The level of “orchestration” (Kress) in these examples was high, as students borrowed and experimented with combinations. While making no claims for such a small selection of introductions, the examples discussed here suggest that writers can take up the possibilities of new media in divergent and knowing ways.

However, perhaps less than one-third of the full cohort of students reflected in such depth and detail, or exploited the multimodal affordances of the technology. Some introductions made few connections beyond self-evident statements. Most of young people’s use of digital technology appears to be mundane rather than spectacular: it is characterized not by dramatic manifestations of innovation and creativity, but by relatively routine forms of communication and information retrieval.

The challenge of contemporary authorship, therefore, is not limited only to multimodal opportunities, but also to moving beyond conventional, two-dimensional writing. Risk-taking at this level requires imagination, scaffolding and exposure to exemplars. Moreover, it asks learners to sit in a “discomforting” space, as Boler would see it,
an ambiguous but open space.

Potter argues curatorship as an innovative literacy practice, noting that the act of digital curation “is now a metaphorical new literacy practice which incorporates the collection, production and exhibition of markers of identity through time in both digital production and social media” (123). Such a concept, he argues, describes the expanded practices new media allow young people to be creative and autonomous. These digital introductions attempted to value and extend the productive multimodal mindset of students while considering the impact of purpose and audience on text creation. Many reflective comments, however, suggested that as learners, preservice teachers were working within their comfort zones and, when prompted, making limited connections between learning and teaching processes.

Careful curation (Potter) was required as students made choices about what to share about themselves and their communities via their narratives. Vulnerability and distance at times played out against agency and the freedom to express oneself through digital formats.

Innovation and creativity do not inhere in digital technology. To mobilize the possibilities of the rhetoric of twenty-first-century rhetorical practices, educators need to develop expanding understandings of the ways conventions can be pushed and challenged.