What role do social media play in educational experiences of access to higher education students in England?

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Abstract. It is argued that digital media have transformed informal learning practices (Bull et al. 2008; 2009; Selwyn 2009), including peer and group learning, although there is evidence that amongst traditional university cohorts, sites such as Facebook are seen more as 'social glue' than as sites of learning (Madge et al, 2009). This paper, reporting on a study which is work-in-progress, investigates the importance of social media sites, such as Facebook, Twitter and blogs, for students studying on Access to Higher Education courses in England. Its goal is to better understand the increasingly complex and relatively under-researched 'mediascape' which defines contemporary education (Orgad 2007). Access students study to gain formal qualifications to be able to apply to study at university; they construct their identities by contrasting their educational objectives (i.e. increasing employability) and character traits (i.e. maturity) with those of 'traditional' university students, whom they perceive as more immature and keen to socialise. With this self-ascribed distinctiveness and goal-orientedness in mind, we trace the usability of social media for educational purposes for Access students. In particular, we look at the role social media may play in engagement in out- of-class learning, and we examine whether they encourage students to be reflexive about their learning experiences (Archer, 2007). We also trace the 'boundary crossing' and identity-forming cultural practices (Giddens, 1991; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Holliday, 1999) as students progressed through their Access course towards its completion and applying to university. Data used in the paper originates from varied social media sites, including Facebook pages, Twitter and blogs to which Access students contribute. It has been collected with the help of Internet searches and through observation of online discussions which we joined thanks to contacts in Access student cohorts who were interviewed for a different study. It was our intention to collect online-based data that reflected locally situated, everyday practices and musings of participants (Hine 2000). The data was then analysed using thematic analysis, identifying emerging themes and constructs (Mason 2002). The digital ethnographic approach that we have adopted in this paper offers distinct advantages in studying Access students' mediated experiences, as it helps to throw light on multimodal, localised mediascapes in which they live and study (Kozinets 2010; Busher and James, 2013); it also offers insights into informal learning practices of Access students

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1. Introduction & Research question

We have become interested in investigating the potential of social media for Access students in the face of conflicting arguments about the value and potential of sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and discussion forums. While some authors argue that social media may be useful learning tools (i.e. Bull et al 2008; Greenhow and Robelia; Selwyn 2009), others contend that they are more often than not just 'social glue', i.e. a device useful for developing social life at university rather than deep learning (Madge et al 2009). This debate notwithstanding, we have noted that research investigating usefulness of social media is based on 'traditional cohort' samples, which are much more homogenous in terms of age than our sample of Access students. As we are not aware of research investigating Access students' use of social networks, we have set out to conduct a small study with such focus which is an offshoot of a larger research project that looks at experiences of Access students in general.

What needs to be clarified at this point is the very special character of the Access course and its students. The Access to Higher Education (HE) Diploma is a qualification which prepares students for study at university. It is designed for people who would like to study in HE but who left school without the usual qualifications, such as A levels, There are over 1,200 different courses leading to the Access to HE Diploma (Art; Business Studies; Nursing; Science; Social Sciences) and courses are available in most further education colleges in England and Wales. There were over 45,000 Access students in 2010-11. 72% students were women, and 28% were men; this proportion is skewed towards women much more than in the case of 'traditional' HE students where 56% were women and 44% were men in 2011-12 (HESA2013). The two largest age groups were 20-24 (35%) and 25-29 (19.5%), with 30 to 50 and above comprising further 32% (QAA 2013). It is clear then that the Access cohort is much more 'feminised' and older than the traditional one. The gender skew may be explained by the fact that by far the most popular Access pathways are those allied to medicine (nursing, midwifery) leading into professions are traditionally women-dominated.

2. Theoretical Framework

In this study we draw from several conceptual framework prominent within education and e-learning more specifically. Some aspects of the communities of practice theory (Lave and Wenger 1991) have helped us anchor the study epistemologically. In particular, we take up the following notions: that all learning is situated and can't be separated from its participants or the conditions in which it's taking place; that learning is based on collaboration and shared meanings, not learning objectives; that binaries, such as teacher/learner, formal/informal learning, theoretical/applied knowledge are not helpful in unpicking the intricacies of the process of learning. This theory has been used in the study of online communities of learners (i.e. Gannon-Leary and Fontainha 2007) as it is compatible with the affordances of modern technology (Conole and Dyke 2004). Furthermore, we have been thinking about our data using Meyer and Land's (Meyer and Land 2003, 2005) notions of threshold concepts and Turner's concept of liminality (Turner 1969). A threshold concept is 'a conceptual building block that progresses the understanding of a subject', while a liminal space is a space of transition, waiting, uncertainty.

These notions rooted in educational theory link up with some branches of theory emergent in the field of digital, or virtual, ethnography. As Hine (Hine 2008) notes, one of the latest challenges in this approach is investigating social realities inherent in both online and offline worlds; perhaps even erasing this differentiation in order to understand the complex processes underpinning the entirety of human activity. In other words, it is pressing to 'develop forms of ethnography that take seriously the social reality of online settings, whilst also exploring their embedding within everyday life (Hine 2008:258).

Several qualities of communities of practice and liminal spaces as described above emerge also as affordances (potential) of ICTs in education as conceptualised by Conole and Dyke (Conole and Dyke 2004). These include communication and collaboration that lead to new forms of dialogue; reflection and criticality; multimodality and non-linearity; finally, risk, fragility, and uncertainty. This combination of different concepts is helpful as it has helped explain patterns that emerged in the collected data.

3. Methodology

Our data for this study is mixed in character so as to reflect Hine's concern with unhelpfulness of the online/offline binary in ethnographic research (2008). It is being constantly generated, therefore is growing in volume. It consists of

a) **Non- reactive data.** Facebook posts/conversations on 3 student-initiated Facebook groups run over the course of last academic year; about 30 posts on a student-oriented discussion forum; a digital diary kept for a year on the same discussion forum, and about 100 Tweets containing the word 'Access'. The data represents a mixture in terms of levels of privacy. Whilst the Facebook groups (which we accessed upon request to the group moderators) were closed and therefore private, the discussions, diary and Tweets were publicly accessible. Following the AoIR guidelines (2004) we contended to ask Facebook contributors for informed consent as they had reasonable expectations of privacy; we treated the other communications as archives and did not ask consent in relation to publishing quotes; however, we kept all names and identifying information anonymous so as to keep the data as confidential as possible. Aware of a volatile debate related to ethical challenges of researching online environments, we considered different solutions whilst settling on one that we felt was fair and practical (Kozinets, 2011).

b) **Reactive data.** Data generated through focus groups at 6 colleges; N=60 students, 48 female and 12 male. Ages ranged from 19 to 45, with majority aged 24-29. Informed consent was obtained and data was anonymised. Focus groups were run in 3 rounds throughout the year. Students interviewed for the main, central project almost unanimously talked about their lack of self-confidence, in both educational and social senses, at the beginning of the course. It may be understandable since they returned to education after a considerable break from formal schooling, more often than not with bad experiences and memories of their earlier endeavours. Many students, especially women, talked about a loss of identities other than those of mothers or wives. Also, many students struggled with IT classes as previously they did

not have the need to use a computer; several joked that their kids were much more advanced in technology use than them. Any earlier experiences of Facebook or other social networks were purely recreational.

4. Emerging themes

The analysis of the data for this paper is work in progress and the analytic framework is still fluid, however certain patterns related to each type of communication begin to emerge.

Once enrolled, students discovered that Facebook allowed them to *communicate outside of class*, crucially at important points during the course, for example when assignments were due and people were 'stuck' or did not understand something. As one of the students explained in a focus group: 'We made a Facebook group so we can all kind of ask. If anyone gets stuck on anything, we can share what we know.' However, at this point some students get excluded if they do not have a profile, as another one noted: 'the down side is people that are not on the social network. I'm not on the social network so obviously I don't get to see what is put on there.' *The sense of familiarity* on student Facebook groups is likely to have emerged due to the fact that students knew each other in class. Assignment-related questions are interspersed with study-related jokes and complaints about the workload. These discussions veer off towards what Hine (Hine 2008) called 'the everyday': children, laundry, cooking. In addition, students used the discussions to release the tension and stress related to the assignments by using informal language, for example: 'I'm screwed' or 'it's bollocks'.

However, *the focus on the assignments* is strong as a majority of posts are about that, and, importantly, they receive the strongest response. A request for help with a learning task induced, on average, a thread of 7 responses (not each of these was written by a different person). Such collaboration suggests the emergence of a budding community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Facebook discussions also allowed the students to establish hierarchies of importance of their different learning tasks. For example, one of the students asked whether anybody had notes from a class debate; six different people advised her to 'make up the notes' on other students' advice. Interestingly whilst the Facebook discussions focused on very specific problems often shared by the whole group, the interactive diary (kept by one student but containing responses from others) constructed many *strategies of 'learning to learn'* on Access (which is a very intensive course as material usually delivered over 2 years is crammed into 1 year here). For example, when in the comments section another student asks the author for help ('my brain has gone to sleep…'), he advises her to

> just try to keep organised and keep on top of all of your work. The last thing you want to happen is for work to start piling up (especially this early on); If you're struggling with anything in lectures then make sure you ASK QUESTIONS! Don't just sit there in the back of the room with a confused look on your face. The students that ask questions are the students that get high marks. Answering your questions is what your teachers are getting paid to do!

This advice indicates a strong 'independent learner' attitude; the author is sharing with others his strategy that is based on good work management and initiative in knowledge-seeking as well as a specific expectation in relation to the tutors'

responsibilities. In this example, the communication/collaborative affordance of ICT is clear as two individuals are able to engage in a conversation about specific study skills necessary to complete the Access course.

It appears that these online discussions are especially appreciated by students who do not have a lot of opportunity to meet up outside classes due to distance or family duties. As one of the focus group participants said: 'We've been talking over Facebook about our first assignment because like we're all in different parts of [city name]'. Some contributors feel unnerved when they find out on Facebook that their assignments or essays are different to those of other students: 'if you put something on Facebook going, 'Oh I've done it this way', and then somebody goes, 'Oh I haven't done it that way'. Then you start panicking.' This description of discomfort related to (painful) acquisition of new knowledge echoes the characterisation of liminal spaces as fragile and uncertain (Meyer and Land 2003)

Whilst the *space to 'panic'* and release tension seems important to students ('I like that we're all comfortable enough to kind of freak out and know that there's going to be someone there to help.) the attitude to learning remains engaged and active. This is in stark contrast to Selwyn's sample of university undergraduate students where promotion of oneself as incompetent and/or disengaged was prominent (Selwyn 2009).

Whilst each Facebook group environment was a close-knit one and the students knew each other personally, the interactive diary prompted a discussion in which Access students from different colleges across the country participated. This variety of perspectives caused discussions to include other aspects of the course, in particular exchanges of *critiques of some organisational aspects of different Access courses*, for example mix-ups with timetabling and classrooms, as well as incorrect information from the tutors regarding organisational procedures regarding the course and the university application process. One contributor wrote: 'The amount of information and misinformation i've heard over the past few weeks even from course tutors has been unbelievable.' Therefore, a publicly available blog-shaped diary allows students to exchange their experiences, praise, and critiques with each other – it becomes a space to build an informed opinion of one's own Access course in comparison with others.

5. Concluding remarks

Obviously, the value of ICTs in education cannot be reduced to Facebook; there are a wealth of different digital media and social networks facilitating learning. Whilst we would shy away from simple verdicts regarding the value of this or any other digital tools for *all* adult learners, the tentative analysis of our data suggests that many students find it useful as it complements and extends their learning beyond the classroom and allows reflection not only on study matters but the way the Access course is delivered (Archer 2007). The unusual/non-tradtional characteristics of our sample may contribute to that; a large proportion of Access students are either women with childcare/family responsibilities or people living in rural areas, for whom collaborative face-to-face study is impossible.

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