

DYNAMIC CONNECTIONS THROUGH THE USE OF SOCIAL NETWORKING TOOLS IN A MULTI-DISCIPLINARY BUSINESS CAPSTONE UNIT

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Abstract

This paper explores the use of social networking tools in the context of changing practices of learning and teaching in a Business Capstone unit at an Australian university. In this unit, both students and staff interact in multi-disciplinary teams using Team-Based learning (TBL). As part of this process we use Web 2.0 tools in the form of a student blog and a staff wiki to engage with emerging technologies in the creation of hybrid knowledge within rapidly changing social and cultural conditions. We aim to show that this fluid online space is contested as the knowledge created is not solely produced by the university but is interconnected with the students' and teachers' own disciplinary knowledge and personal understandings, along with their digital literacy practices. We conclude that the dynamic connections made in the space of an online environment are not innocent, therefore ongoing questions must be raised over the ownership and authority of that knowledge and the ways it is created. Such questioning leads to the development of transformative pedagogies and different ways of thinking about literacy in higher education.

Introduction

There has never been a more crucial moment for educators and curriculum developers to engage with the opportunities and challenges presented through the use of dynamic social networking technologies in university learning settings. Highlighted in *The Horizon Report* (2011) are the trends and challenges for the next 5 years ranked according to their significance. One key trend stressed in the report is the impact of globalisation on the workplace with the resulting increase in the collaborative nature of Business interactions through the use of Internet technologies (p. 3). The report states in this context that it is the team which works together to bring about creative and complex solutions to matters rather than by the individual who works in isolation. For educators and curriculum developers the design and implementation of projects that address these issues, along with the task of developing students' digital literacies present considerable challenges.

In response to these challenges, at an Australian university a compulsory Capstone subject sequence has been developed for third-year students that involves two one-semester subjects: Integrative Business Practice and Industry Consulting Project. The sequence is compulsory for all students undertaking degrees in the Faculty of Business and Enterprise. Students can therefore potentially come from any of the five major schools within the Faculty: Human Resources, Accounting, International Business, Marketing, and Entrepreneurship. The Capstone units are designed to provide opportunities for students to work in multi-disciplinary teams where they apply the practical skills they develop in the first semester to a client-based project in the second semester. Students prepare an academic poster and a report detailing advice to the client.

We will argue that the use of Web 2.0 tools by students and teaching staff based around a TBL program is both creative and disruptive. Knowledge can be shaped differently when students and teachers are partially released from the constraints of the norms of the academic discourse community. In the Capstone unit, creative discipline connections can emerge when the students and staff as *newcomers* become agents of change.

Spatial Connections

In this paper the new *connections* that students and teachers make through interaction with social networking tools are dynamic events. Hybrid knowledge emerges as socially situated, spatial and unbounded activity that is contingent and not tied to the perspectives of a single discipline. These dynamic understandings of social space are different from past understandings where Soja (1989), a postmodern geographer, pointed out that space was thought to be neutral, fixed and dead. According to Gulson and Symes (2007) citing Massey (1993, p.100) “[space] was an empty vessel within which action took place.” For teachers and students in the Capstone unit, through interaction in the digital spaces of the social networking tools, disruptive possibilities of discipline knowledge, and individual and team understandings are facilitated in newly created spaces that are “open, continuous and fluid” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006, p. 1).

Although our paper does not report a full ethnographic study, we present some contextual detail of the Capstone program and some preliminary steps and findings we have made in both teaching and research.

Making Multiple Connections through Social Networking Tools

For the Capstone unit, we established the student blog and the teacher wiki in the university website Blackboard. Even though we regarded this site as a fairly static

student and subject management tool, the initiatives we undertook offer alternative uses of Blackboard to both teachers and students.

There are many reported potential uses and benefits for the educational use of the read/write Web to enhance learning. For example, social software offers tools and pedagogical approaches to support the development of graduate capabilities including writing, inquiry/research, critical thinking, creative problem-solving, and team work (Design for Learning, 2009). Web 2.0 technologies also enable the development of learning environments to foster active, independent learning (Goodyear, 2002), collaboration (Brook & Oliver, 2003), authentic learning (Herrington et al., 2007), and community building and modelling (Arnold & Paulus, 2010).

In this porous space the use of tools such as blogs is not just a matter of students writing a short reflection or uploading images, but the sharing of one another's understandings based on learning experiences and those from their own background and life histories. Feedback between students as well as between teachers and students creates a dynamic environment where students have the freedom to experiment with ideas in a relatively safe environment of the University website, Blackboard. We considered the use of Blackboard offered students an opportunity to work in a *semi-public space* with an audience restricted to their own class and their teachers without the attendant privacy pressures of a more open space such as Facebook. It is what Canagarajah (2004) refers to as *safe space*, but not *too safe* (our emphasis) as here there are also many difficult and revealing moments that must be navigated. There is always an element of risk when one communicates publicly. Yet, that can be a very useful learning experience and one where the serendipitous can occur.

Socially Situated Learning

Social theories focus on the external, the physical and social aspects of learning, thus learning is understood as something that occurs "outside the head" (Jones, 2008, p. 169). Such understandings go beyond the notion that knowledge is transferred from teacher to student where the experience of the individual is a private activity. Duff (2010) also argues that "academic discourse socialization is a socially situated process" (p. 167) rather than a site for the delivery of knowledge, thus learning occurs in an interactive environment. With the inclusion of social networking tools in the Capstone unit, the process of knowledge creation is dynamic as students and teachers move from a social space where traditional textual and verbal modes are still mainly used into one where they use an expanded repertoire of styles that includes the use of multiple technologies. Thus new forms and meanings are created.

Team-based Learning and Working in Groups

In order to meet the needs of our graduating students who are mainly transitioning to a workplace where collaborative approaches to work are expected, the team-based learning (TBL) approach, detailed by Michaelsen (1994), was used as a foundation for the Capstone program design. A further benefit of TBL mentioned by Michaelsen is increased social support for various types of at-risk students, enhanced interpersonal skills, involvement in the course content and issues raised. As already mentioned, our student cohort in the Capstone program consists of large numbers of international students so we considered that both formal and informal interaction in the target language of English would be of additional value.

The TBL method is a key change to traditional teaching pedagogy, where a teacher reviews content and the student listens. In TBL the situation is reversed as students actively manage the teaching and the learning and the instructor is present to guide the group as needed. For the student, “learning is viewed as the process of *doing* or being knowledgeable in ways that are valued and recognized, rather than *having* knowledge” (Anderson & Zuiker, 2010, p. 292). Thus, the TBL approach, as used in our Capstone program, affords greater flexibility. Through multi-disciplinary team interaction students negotiate their own understandings in alternative ways to that of schooled, single-discipline, teacher-directed knowledge.

Notwithstanding, in a recent study of undergraduate students, Summers and Volet (2008) found that by the third year of their studies students became less willing to work in mixed groups. This tendency was more apparent amongst multilingual students who were expected to be more receptive to mixing than monolinguals on account of their intercultural experiences. For our Capstone unit that was made up of third-year students, a large percentage (61.7% in 2010) of whom were international students, we had to take this into consideration. An important question raised by Carroll and Ryan (2005) is around the responsibility of universities to their international students. Rather than regarding international students as *a problem* to be solved, Carroll and Ryan argue that it is imperative to capitalize on diversity in the teaching program. Yet, as these scholars point out, making diversity a focus of academic content and pedagogies does not easily translate into practice.

Diverse Connections in a Parallel Process

From the outset we envisaged the creation of diverse connections through the use of the social networking tools in a multi-disciplinary Capstone unit. The dynamic use of blogs and wikis by students and staff for the purpose of reflection, posing

questions, and the negotiation of multi-disciplinary knowledge are important aspects that are not emphasized in Michaelson's TBL process.

In recent years, the development of Web 2.0 tools has attracted considerable attention. According to Gill (2005), blogs can be used at different levels of education for different purposes such as the promotion of media literacy and to facilitate user-centred learning. Alongside the more formal TBL sessions, the Capstone students interact in informal ways about their personal and collaborative learning experiences and the wider connections they make in the social world by using a reflective, multimodal blog. At the same time, a wiki was established, which operated within a framework designed by the Capstone teaching team. Here we could report on week-to-week activities and enter into dialogue with one another and pose questions of process and content (including the comments made by students in their blogs). Thus connections were made in parallel, multi-directional and multi-disciplinary ways.

A Parallel Process: The Student Blog and the Teacher Wiki

The Student Blog

Over the period of a semester the students were asked to submit five reflective blog entries on insights gained through different aspects of the Capstone experience. Two of the blogs were to include a still or moving image that reflected the point they were making or the issue that they were considering. One of the aspects of the assessment was to demonstrate the connections the students made to the wider community, to experiences in their own or others' cultures including interactions with knowledge in other degree programs or locations.

The Teacher Wiki

During the semester the Capstone team completed a weekly wiki that was formulated on a negotiated team design. As each TBL session was designed by teachers with different discipline backgrounds, we felt it was critically important that we each give immediate feedback through the wiki to other team members in order to learn from one another's experience. For example, we reported on student attendance, how we managed the session over the two hour period, how well we thought the students had engaged with both the individual and team tasks, issues that arose from this and action taken, how the students and teachers managed their own diversity, conflict management in teams, unplanned developments with the content and/or process and administration successes and problems.

We found that the wikis provided a rich source of knowledge and information for the teaching staff. The wiki was also a space where we could have 'conversations,' take risks and traverse areas where we might have lacked expertise. For example, one staff member wrote:

Still struggling to get everyone to participate in the discussion-maybe I could sit in on one of your sessions, M? I like the idea of everyone saying their piece, but I need to see this done to convince myself it's possible!

Diverse Connections — Working in Diverse Teams

The Capstone students were organised into small teams (5–7 students) and were required to stay in these teams for the assessable TBL sessions. The students were assigned to teams based on their subject major, gender, ethnicity, and so on. The primary motivation and preference for teams was to serve as a means of promoting a connection in a vastly diverse student population. An international student describes a problem he encountered when working in a diverse team:

I think one of the hurdles to get this project done is the language barrier (there are 3 locals and 3 international students in our group).

This student expresses a common assumption there are particular norms associated with speaking English that prevents the team from successfully interacting with one another. This point is taken up by Canagarajah (2006) who argues that in a globalized world there must be “speech accommodation for shuttling between English varieties and speech communities” (p. 233). He acknowledges that in formal institutional contexts such as academic communication there are, however, established norms and conventions that have to be abided by (p. 234).

Yet, in informal interaction, if we consider the notion of *accommodation* that Canagarajah refers to in his blog, the student doesn't specifically state whether at the outset or at any point this team openly discussed different varieties of English and the possibility of alternative strategies of communication and negotiation. Furthermore, perhaps during team meetings, rather than vesting the power of communicating solely in English, if there was another dominant language group, students could have negotiated meaning in their own language and then discussed those understandings in English with the whole team.

A different perspective on team work was put forward by a student undertaking an accounting major:

Working with groups throughout the semester and having to rely on them was definitely very new to me. Although there were the ups and downs within the groups during the semester, I still think it was great time and it will be missed. In some discipline areas there is very little group work undertaken with the result those students experience considerable difficulty in knowledge negotiation and time and task allocation and responsibility to the group.

This student has used his blog as a space where he feels he can voice his opinion and reflect on other experiences he has had in the Business degree. He raises the broader issue of single-discipline, teacher-directed pedagogy where the focus is on the individual's response to knowledge, usually through formal, written assessment tasks. He also mentions additional aspects of team interaction which involve making social connections and taking responsibility that benefits the group. Whilst this student reflects on the challenges of the co-construction of knowledge in more formal spaces, he does not mention the value of the less regulated space of the blog as another domain for such activity. Yet, he unwittingly takes this opportunity to use the blog tool.

Parallel and Interconnected Spaces

Arnold and Paulus (2010) ask "What happens when a group of learners has two venues for community-building available (online and face-to-face)? Does this create two separate communities or do they overlap?" (p. 195). Having the facility to engage with knowledge and ideas in different time and space the flexibility of these social networking tools is highlighted when different communities are created. In response to Arnold and Paulus's question we can reply that in our case in the Capstone program, the different communities *do* overlap.

Following a Capstone session on transcultural communication, a teacher writes of the connections she made between two different sessions in the Capstone program and their connection with an entry that was made in the student blog:

What pleased me was the level of trust demonstrated by the students toward one another as well as to me. This was a very risky session for all of us. In a blog last week, following a project planning session, a student commented on a difference of opinion or a minor conflict that arose in her group around the delivery of tangible things in a project. Her insight was that not everything is measurable. She gave an example of increased awareness as an important outcome that is not measurable.

This is an important example of the dynamic use of the teacher wiki in the way the teacher comments on a class face-to-face session but at the same time she makes connections with a student's insights recorded in her blog where the student questions traditional practice that she has encountered in the degree program. This knowledge is thus made available for other Capstone teachers for consideration.

A further wiki example shows that when students give voice to their opinions in their blog the wiki offers possibilities for teachers to deal with problems as they arise. A teacher wrote that a student complained that there was not enough time to prepare for the major project, which included the preparation of an academic poster:

One of the main challenges in this unit was the lack of sufficient time to prepare for the poster session and this was a common feeling shared by almost everyone in the last lecture.

As a result of this concern, in the following semester staff took action to ensure that the cases for the project were made available earlier and that a specialist literacy teacher worked with the whole Capstone group on examples of the type of text construction usually encountered in a Business case. An occurrence such as this emphasizes the efficacy of the teacher wiki and the student blog as successful engagement for both parties with unpredictable outcomes.

Trajectories of Literacies

As a result of globalization, there are sophisticated changes in technology that impact on the ways meaning is distributed and understood (Kress, 2003). Students are bombarded with a dazzling array of discourses and media that involve an integration of print, sounds, images, gesture and different spaces. These new forms of communication are ones of enormous complexity and therefore present different challenges as social meanings of time, space and bodies are transformed. As a result, literacy is transformed as the new technologies open up vast possibilities for the emergence of “new forms of discourse, new forms of authorship, and new ways to create and participate in communities” (Kern, 2006, p. 183).

In the Capstone program students are asked to form allegiances and make meanings in ways and for purposes that they had possibly not previously considered in their degree program. For example, the designer of the first session in the Capstone considered that it was crucial for students to take a radical step in order to make new connections in their literacy learning. As an intervention the students were asked to sketch their identities. The act of sketching affords a space where students are not constrained through the sole use of textual work such as reading and writing. Opportunities are created for them to engage with different identities in their program and develop a different kind of relationship between themselves as well as with the teacher (Grey, 2009). As acknowledgment a student in human resource management blogs:

The first day of tutorials when we formed into our respective teams i was a bit taken aback t our first task, drawing a picture of myself on a piece of butcher's paper. I couldn't say in my uni life that i had done something as elementary as this so i was rather excited to get stuck into it. This first task formed a trend that we would follow for the whole semester. Project Practicum was a breath of fresh air for me. After years of sitting behind a desk and listening to teachers, lecturers and tutors talk at you it was good to have a class where the students took control.

Having sketched her identity, this student is expressing a sense of freedom, autonomy and value of creativity that is rarely experienced in the space of a traditional Business degree program. By stating that the students directed the process throughout the Capstone program rather than the teachers, she highlights a shift to the type of spaces that could be possible in other academic programs, and an engagement with meanings that have not been pre-determined.

The sketching activity along with other sounds and images were incorporated into the blog as a requirement that aimed to expand students' engagement with digital literacies. This inclusion also gave them an occasion to raise questions about their experience. An international student undertaking an accounting major commented on working with sounds and images through digital storytelling thus making a wider connection with the professional discourses of the workplace:

... as I jog my memory back to the last thirteen weeks, I can't help but feel that this unit hasn't taught me anything theoretical. All that it has taught me is practical ... like how to express ideas and concepts through visuals and images. Early on in the semester, I was formally introduced to the idea of *digital story telling*. The message that presenter made in the lecture was simple and yet resonated with me ... that at any point of time each one of us has something to tell and what better way to tell it than by using moving images and sounds. Initially, I struggled with the idea of how can digital story telling be used in the corporate world? But, then I realized that almost every organization, that's worth its while, is already using it.

This clearly shows that the student was able to connect subject matter to personal and social phenomena in an effort to construct his own understandings. Writing about one part of the assessment requirements a student reflects on using other media for the presentation of the assessable academic poster:

I think that it was great to do a poster presentation for this subject. The last time I had to make a poster was in high school for science, probably year 9! (6 years ago!) It is a lot different to all my other classes where we would normally just do a PowerPoint presentation. It was a great opportunity to use a different form of presentation and I liked it that we got to see the other team's posters and ask questions. I'm going to put a photo of one of our posters in this blog.

Discussion and Conclusion

In the student blogs and teacher wiki we can begin to see some of the challenges and possibilities that both parties face using social networking tools in the Capstone program. Through the dynamic process we have described, both students and teachers have developed new relationships, created hybrid spaces

and thus different meanings. We shared insights, posed questions and took risks in the ways we interacted thus opening up alternative connections.

The students engaged with their blog in creative, multimodal and sometimes provocative ways thus expanding their literacies repertoire to those of shared global images (Appadurai, 1996). They had the rare opportunity to question and negotiate institutionally accepted practices and discipline knowledge. Even though the blog legitimizes student knowledge and experience, it is difficult to know how much investment the students had in reading one another's blogs. A small percentage commented on others' entries or engaged in light-hearted banter with one another in the comment space of the blog. Others took up some of the blog comments in class discussion. There were also instances in the blogs, not reported here, where students were able to air issues of personality or cultural clashes that took place in teams. Students might not have aired such views in a face-to-face encounter.

It is clear that the students valued working in multi-disciplinary teams in a variety of creative and often demanding ways, however, there are some limitations. Both students and teachers work in institutional frameworks which demand that students be prepared to enter the workforce, but this preparation mainly takes place within the confines of the institution, under the institutional gaze. We used the social networking tools partially to address this restriction, even though these spaces remain within the University Blackboard system.

Yet, when the walls of the classroom are made flexible, both students and teachers can use their resources to make alternative connections in unbounded space such as cyberspace. There is a shift from thinking of interacting with technology as purely a technical, de-contextualized activity to more spatial understandings. As a result, new communities emerge where issues of power and difference in different contexts, as well as what knowledge and whose knowledge is powerful, are brought to the fore. In a world of rapidly changing technologies and literacies, educators and curriculum developers in higher education must engage with this dynamism.

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