

Spark: UAL Creative Teaching and Learning Journal

What's in a name?: Event review of the 'Designs on eLearning: Anxiety and Security' conference, at The New School, New York, 21st – 22nd September 2016

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Abstract

Event review of the eleventh *Designs on eLearning conference* (also known as *DeL*), held on the 21st and 22nd September 2016, hosted by The New School in New York. Coordinated in partnership by The New School along with the University of the Arts London (UAL), Penn State University and Texas State University and centred on the theme of 'Anxiety and Security', *DeL 2016* explored digital anxieties in art and design higher education.

Keywords

DeL, digital pedagogy, e-learning, EdTech, anxiety, well-being

At the conclusion of the *DeL 2016* conference, delegates came together to appraise the two days of presentation, workshop and debate which had taken place at The New School in New York. Conveners asked a number of questions of those in attendance. What themes had we recognised? What might we hope for? And what does 'DeL' even mean? Following a consideration of the current environment of the digital within art and design Higher Education, these closing questions confronted the very staging of an event such as *DeL*. We debated the space that is created when disparate individuals assemble to explore an agenda established by a collection of abstracts, bringing institutional and disciplinary perspectives to an arena. Delegates at an educational conference are experts in the field of presentation and discussion of concepts – in teaching – yet all have come here to learn.

Established in 2005, UAL, Texas State and Penn State Universities and The New School take turns to host *DeL*, where creative educators from across the globe unite annually to investigate attitudes, ideas and approaches to an array of issues – namely those in which 'EdTech' plays a role. This terminology provides a fitting arena for *DeL*, since each title employed is inherently contestable, happily debatable and ever developing. Despite ongoing attempts, it is difficult to find an adequate soubriquet to define its field, located at the intersection of arts education, educational instruction, technological design, digital pedagogy, forming a conglomeration of centres of learning and debates that contribute to the notion of a-network, in which the forces at play disallow stagnancy.

Not only does the annual physical relocation of the conference allow insights into the work of colleagues based in other establishments, it also provides the opportunity for delegates to appreciate the environments in which this operates. Tours of the New School campus with conference co-organiser Cynthia Lawson provided the opportunity to appreciate spacial design, which gave many of us cause to reconsider – at times enviously! – the impact of architecture on educational experience. Given that many discussions were concerned with 'alternative' learning spaces unconstrained by

geography, such reference to 'place' may seem incongruous, for *DeL* embraces notions of learning that are unbound by physical location. Yet curiosity about the affordances of technology, as evidenced in many presentations that examined course-specific interventions or wider incentives that drew creatively on digital resources and social media tools, allows for this freedom. The benefits of spending time in a different college, hearing about the inventiveness of others is one of the most advantageous effects of attending a conference; and certainly at *DeL* we realise that others' creative approaches may benefit one's own environment. The ethos of sharing processes of learning and imaginative conceptions of the spaces where this may happen are key to *DeL*'s continuing success.

This year's conference focus on 'Anxiety and Security in the Curriculum' encompassed satellite themes of 'Identity and Privacy in Online Educational Spaces', 'Digital Presence and Professionalization' and 'Digital Wellbeing'. Educators from Australia, Brazil, Canada, New Zealand, the UK and the USA reacted in various measure: some unpicked titular terms to weave analytic illustration, others used them as springboards to launch practice- or discipline-based enquiry. Responses came from across the fields of the arts (including representation from all UAL colleges) as well as disciplines such as music, academic development, administration, student services, and IT. Though referred to in much of the conversation, the voices of technicians and librarians were decidedly missing and one hope is that these perspectives are more audibly and visibly represented in subsequent events.

Provocative keynotes kick-started both days. George Siemens from the University of Texas at Arlington (UTA) and Joel Towers of Parsons, commenced by debating the role of the Design School in today's society, skillfully moderated by The New School's Professor of History, Claire Potter. Responding to the question 'Is Design Education giving students the digital agility needed to tackle society's big challenges?', these debaters interrogated one another's espoused views, thereby suggesting questions about the world we inhabit and the choices we make when responding to various sociopolitical stimuli. Writer and self-described 'Ed-Tech's Cassandra', Audrey Watters introduced the second day. Presenting a rich narrative enquiry, in which she considered attitudes to and the utilisation of digital technologies within wider educational spheres, she likened this situation to humankind's relationship with the pigeon (2016). This call to attention investigated and questioned these associations, illustrated by images that offered additional storylines as a counter-melody. Both keynote approaches encouraged delegates to reconsider the contexts in which we operate, as well as how and with whom we attempt to engage.

Attendees discussed issues raised by these ideas and those of the other papers and workshops around the sessions. While walking between presentation spaces or chatting over the beer, pizza and pool tables of the conference diner, we identified ways to investigate the official themes for ourselves – for example, our collaboration on this review. The questions posed by the presentations chimed with issues we educators had been mulling over, demonstrating a commonality of attitude and factors that frustrate and animate us. Since we could not attend every parallel session, it is not possible to give an accurate synopsis of each speaker's points here. This privilege of choice did, however, lead us to consider the format of 'the conference' and question whether the presentation of research-as-paper detracted from the potential as a forum for discussion, as promised in the proposal. Why should art and design associated disciplines or educational environments adhere to structures set out by arguably less-creative bodies? As arts educators, we constantly seek to improve educational situations for the benefit of our students and colleagues. By reimagining conference structures, inherently creative conferences such as *DeL* might play a wider, transformational role.

Drawing upon our own analyses and attitudes expressed by plenary contributors it is possible to discern a number of common themes. Generated by the conference hashtag (#del16), Twitter

comments are also a resource to which anyone not physically present may now refer. Whilst the following themes appear in no particular order and do not provide a comprehensive account, it is clear that many delegates were concerned with the preservation and support of humanity in spheres of educational technology. Strong warnings were levied against submission to the notion of a 'Learning Management System', which should rather be seen as resource to serve the people that rely on them than a template to form education. Issues of social justice were widely prevalent. Even though the affordances of social media are potentially inclusive, we must be aware of its ability to exclude, as well as to privilege the voices of those who are confident of their right to be heard, which can further isolate those unfamiliar with these means of engagement. In our increasingly technological world, apprehensions about mental health and well-being were raised, and whilst we may have disagreed about approach, it was clear that unspoken concerns are a major aspect of educators' roles. The opportunity to present and explore concerns in a safe space highlighted how vital it is that our students also feel able to name hidden factors that affect their learning. Recognition of the duty of care we have towards students and the relevance of our intention to nurture senses of agency beyond institutional battles for autonomy emerged as prevalent agendas.

As the conference invited us to reflect on anxiety, other topics of note included the misuse or misconception of the data our students unwittingly provide. The additional pressures created by insisting that students engage with whichever technological tools are currently advocated was also a dominant topic. Alongside these were fears of showing one's failures (or lack of reliable successes) in public/permanent online spaces, which extended neatly into the eminently Tweetable phrase 'risking failure, failing to risk'. The nature of online critique was also deliberated via the question, empoweringly liberating or distressingly trollsme? Individual agency, our capacity to fashion the platforms we need rather than accepting what commercial developers foist on us, were threads that recurred in questions and comments. Assumptions were likewise challenged when we were presented with insights from IT and administrative colleagues, who provided refreshing perspectives of the humanity and pedagogy which were reported as the fundamental motivations of these areas.

The underlying subtext of *DeL 2016* might be encapsulated as a sense of EdTech's emergence from the shrouds of 'e-learning', celebrated in the utilisation and subversion of 'digital tools' institutionally. At the beginning of the conference's second decade, the tone might have been characterised as a desire to marry approaches to technological process with abilities to think and form. Within many presentations we detected conceptual intent, necessitating exploration through trial-and-error experimentation or the discussion and reflection inherent to creative practice. As a field we know that the practical capabilities of our sector can make the best of things, but we do not claim to know exactly how to proceed and are eager to explore ideas collaboratively. The concluding atmosphere was spirited; and there was a palpable sense of not wanting it to end. Amidst networking promises to keep in touch and join forces, we were struck by the understanding that it is up to us to make this happen: a realisation that we have the technology and must harness the impetus ourselves. This special edition of *Spark* is a way disseminating and expanding these discussions. It includes contributions from those working beyond the immediate context of UAL to allow such links to be identified and formed. A straw poll suggested that a third of those present on that closing afternoon were first-time attendees indicating a growing body with metamorphic intentions. *DeL* questions its delegates precisely because it aims to represent and expand their requirements and their reach.

As the terrain of *DeL* has evolved, the original 'Designs on e-Learning' title of the conference is no longer illustrative of its present scope or future intent. One delegate made the tongue-in-cheek suggestion that it should be 'the conference formally known as [symbol]', which seemed apposite. As a sector we may be ambivalent to brands, but *DeL* is *a thing*. It would seem to function variously, depending upon context, whether in discussion, design, divergence or exploration, experimentation,

encouragement – and perhaps even liberation, linkage, laughter. And – love? Rarely heard in relation to educational conferences, this word was uttered several times during the proceedings of *DeL 2016*: a college environment where affect, care and well-being appeared higher on the agenda than politics, technology or data. Aptly, in a city branded by a heart, in voice, text and Emoji, love for digitally engaged learning was named, questioned and shared.

References

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Biographies

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