

Spark: UAL Creative Teaching and Learning Journal

Editorial

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I'm delighted to have been involved in bringing together this special edition of *Spark* based on contributions from the *Designs on eLearning* conference (*DeL*) hosted at the New School, New York in September 2016. The international conference is over a decade old and last year included keynotes by George Siemens and Audrey Watters. It's run by a partnership of the University of the Arts London, Texas State University, Penn State University and Parsons School of Design at the New School in New York. Submissions for this edition were welcomed from those that presented at *DeL* and are therefore authored by individuals representing a range of institutions involved in art and design education.

I highly recommend the ebullient event review of the conference by Graham Hibbert and Jon Martin to frame your reading of this edition. Their review captures the convergent essence of the conference, which is:

...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.

(Hibbert and Martin, 2017, p.172)

The conference theme of **Anxiety and Security** has taken on increasing global significance in recent months and many of us are attempting to come to an understanding of our practices in the shadow of structural and political threats to the creative sector. Nevertheless, notions of Anxiety and Security at *DeL* were largely considered in the context of the student experience of digital, a theme which requires much thought as creative disciplines explore their location in a networked world.

A strong thread throughout this special edition is the anxiety students experience as they attempt to (or are forced to) become visible within the networked environment. Much of this anxiety comes from a lack of security in their identity as the Web all but requires creative practitioners to negotiate new forms of personal and creative identities in potentially high risk environments. I'm heartened to see that Prensky's well-worn notion of the Digital Native and Digital Immigrant is cited as a misleading line of thinking in this regard. Silke Lange and Claire Robertson's paper highlights that widespread student anxiety about the digital, especially where it intersects with issues of identity:

...diverges from the belief that current cohorts have 'grown up digital and therefore are reliant in using digital technologies'

(Prensky, 2012, in Lange and Robertson, 2017, p.140)

This has led the authors to take a cultural, rather than technological, approach to the digital for a Masters course in Fashion Communication with Promotion at Central St Martins. A similar critique of Prensky is to be found in Niberca Polo's case study reviewing a free online/offline portfolio-based course for under-served high school students in New York City set-up by the New School.

In either native or immigrant camp, anxiety builds from the onset, as students struggle to conform to these constructs, which simplify complex needs and capabilities.

(Polo, 2017, p.150)

Here Niberca makes it clear that these definitions are not only simplistic but are pedagogically damaging. This is hardly surprising as Prensky developed the Digital Natives and Immigrants idea before the rapid emergence of Social Media and networked identity in the form we see today.

Intriguingly, while Lange and Robertson's paper discusses the way the permanence of our online traces repress students' desire to take risks, Pete Rive's paper explores the ways in which students can secure the permanence of their online presence within the volatility of the Web. Here we see an inherent tension wherein the digital is perceived as both transient and permanent, emphasising the need to carefully and actively design learning that considers both positions from the student's point of view. In her paper on Cybermedia Literacy, Laura Scherling explores this theme, citing Turkle to highlight the tension between play (or risk) and permanence in digital environments:

...networking makes it easier to play with identity [...] but harder to leave the past behind, because the Internet is forever.

(Turkle, 2015, p.169 in Scherling, 2017, p.168)

The importance of fostering a sense of belonging to a cohort and an institution as a balancing factor to identity anxieties is discussed by Lynette Sheridan Burns and Kaye Shumack in their approach to designing an online version of their Bachelor of Communication programme. Ensuring students feel part of a community is paramount here, something which has to be explicitly designed into online pedagogies.

Belonging, or a lack thereof, is central to John Peacock's work. This paper analyses an attempt to better connect with Native American students through teaching and learning via the use of videoconferencing. The paper emphasises that, as we are increasingly discovering, cultural rather than technical challenges are at the fore when we consider 'connection'. I would argue that the manner in which the Web has driven globalisation and forms of internationalisation in higher education has simply served to emphasise the cultural differences in our perceptions of 'authentic' education and how this is linked our construction of personal identity.

One aspect of our identity we are all anxious about is data security. Who owns our data and what can they do with it? This issue is sliding into the education sector as we consider how best to handle student data reaped from many sources across the institution including our digital learning platforms. In his paper on student control over data Michael Madaio suggests the use of Speculative Design to explore options with students and to ensure they are well informed about how their data is being used. As ever here we see new opportunities arising from the digital alongside the potential to disrupt and abuse our relationships with institutions and each other.

The opportunities for new modes of learning supported by digital technology are outlined by Dale Blasingame in his case study of journalism students using mobile phones to construct audio and video narrative accounts of their time exploring a Texas National Park. Here we see that the availability and agility of mobile technologies is redefining and expanding professional roles:

journalists have had to assume tasks that were traditionally characteristic of other professions, which has forced them to develop a more complex and demanding profile.

(Masip and Mico, 2009, p.93 in Blasingame, 2017, p.123)

This is a trend which is affecting almost all of the creative disciplines in some way and is a good example of how the digital is not simply making work more efficient, rather it is reshaping our understanding of work and eroding disciplinary boundaries. We feel the weight of this phenomenon in our own institutions as we attempt to respond to expanded, digital, expectations of teaching and technical roles. Catherine Wasiuk et al propose the highly efficient '1minuteCPD' (Continuing Professional Development) online format as a friendly and realistic method of developing staff digital capabilities. These super-consumable slices of CPD have been viewed over 50,000 times by individuals from across the world.

This special, *Designs on eLearning*, edition of *Spark* covers a lot of ground - which is to be expected when we reflect on how quickly the digital has become infused through so many aspects of creative practices including teaching and learning. What strikes me the most is how, in the *DeL* community, we are commonly discussing the 'why' as well as the 'what' of digital technology. This is a much-needed critical approach, which questions the ideologies behind the introduction of 'new' technology, thereby avoiding the consumerist view that technology itself should 'solve' or 'mend' the complexity of teaching practices.

As the technology stabilizes we, as teachers (including 'technical' staff) and researchers, are spending less time focused on the form of the technology and more on considering the effects and opportunities of the digital. This is particularly the case when engaging with the networked nature of the digital, which raises questions of identity and reformulates our understanding of the disciplines. These digital effects are both pertinent, demanding our immediate attention, and emergent, creating a dynamic and challenging environment.

Given this, my hope as one of the *DeL* chairs, is that we continually reconsider the role and relevance of the conference. Emblematic of this is our recent name change to the 'Digitally Engaged Learning' conference. Certainly this special edition is an excellent example of a new output or 'mode' for *DeL* which we hope to continue as we plan the next version of the conference which will be hosted by the University of the Arts London at Central St Martins in September 2017, under the banner of 'Teaching Making / Making Teaching'.

References

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Biography

David White is Head of Digital Learning in the Teaching and Learning Exchange at UAL. He researches online learning practices in both informal and formal contexts. David has led and been an expert consultant on numerous studies around the use of technology for learning in the UK higher education sector and is the originator of the 'Visitors and Residents' paradigm, which describes how individuals engage with the Web.