

Connecting or constructing academic literacies on Facebook

Mark Bassett
Auckland University of Technology

This paper outlines proposed doctoral research into how postgraduate students develop academic literacies within the bounds of learning theories and Web 2.0 tools that their lecturers select. Lea and Street's (1998) academic literacies approach, which views literacies as contested social practices, forms the overarching view of literacy in this research. Over one semester, multiple case studies of postgraduate students will be conducted as they complete a paper within their subject of study. Students will use a private Facebook community to complete learning tasks and engage in student initiated discussions. The learning tasks will provide opportunities to examine the student experience of both the constructivist and connectivist paradigms. The aim is to further understanding of the student experience that can inform the creation of sound, theory driven Web 2.0-based learning tasks that effectively assist students in the development of their academic literacies. Feedback on the proposed research is sought from the Ascilite community.

Keywords: Facebook, academic literacies, constructivism, connectivism

Introduction

Postgraduate students have varying levels of academic experience and must also develop numerous academic literacies (Lea & Street, 1998) as they engage with their chosen subject of study. As they do this, students are increasingly provided with tasks that make use of Web 2.0 tools. Web 2.0 learning tasks are often underpinned by constructivist learning theory (Cochrane, 2012; Conole, 2010), with the more recent connectivist theory of learning (Siemens, 2004) also gaining currency. This paper outlines a proposed PhD research project that aims to describe the student experience of developing academic literacies through the use of Facebook within the constructivist and connectivist pedagogies. In-depth case studies, using constructivist grounded theory methods of data analysis, will provide rich descriptions of how students develop their academic literacies during a semester-long paper that embeds academic literacies learning into course content via Web 2.0 tools. The paper ends with a call for critical input from the Ascilite community.

Facebook

Social integration into university life is a clear function of Facebook when used in learning and teaching. Duffy (2011) argues that Facebook can connect students with peers and teachers in communities, and that being part of such communities is crucial to successful learning experiences. McCarthy's (2010) qualitative study into the use of Facebook in a blended learning environment for first-year tertiary students indicated that interactions between EAL learners and learners who had English as a first language were enhanced; communities were started online and then those networks realised during face to face classes.

The measurable impact of Facebook on academic achievement is uncertain, with perceptions of its usefulness as a learning tool mixed at best. In their quantitative study of student perceptions of Facebook, Kabilan, Ahmad and Abidin (2010) found that when English language learners focused on learning tasks more than socialising, they found Facebook useful for improving writing and communication skills, with the added incentive of not feeling embarrassed about making mistakes. In a three year study of Facebook as an online learning environment for first year undergraduate students in Australia and Singapore, McCarthy (2013) found that involvement in virtual discussions allowed time for students to create and measure their responses.

Kirschner and Karpinski (2010) surveyed 102 undergraduate and 117 graduate students in the United States to examine the impact of Facebook use on Grade Point Average (GPA). Facebook users had a lower GPA and spent less time studying than non-users. Similar results were obtained in another

survey of 1,839 undergraduate students in the United States (Junco, 2012); with Facebook using students having a lower GPA compared to non-users. Also, a study of 239 undergraduate students in Sweden reported that Facebook use negatively influenced assignment preparation (Rouis et al., 2011).

In all of the research summarised in the previous paragraph, Facebook was not used as a learning tool; its use was social only and outside the bounds of the intended learning and teaching context. Therefore, if students use Facebook for purposes other than learning, it can be a disruption that can impact negatively on academic achievement. In contrast, if lecturers purposefully employ Facebook based on sound pedagogy, it can have a positive effect (Duffy, 2011; Kabilan et al., 2010; & McCarthy, 2010, 2013). However, in their quantitative study of 210 undergraduate and 32 postgraduate students' perceptions of Facebook, Irwin, Ball, Desbrow and Leveritt (2012) found that only 51% of the students thought it was an effective learning tool. Paradoxically, 76% of the students recommended that lecturers use Facebook in future courses, with Irwin et al. concluding that further research would be necessary in order to ascertain whether and how it could enhance learning.

Academic literacies

Since the 1970s, the term literacy itself has taken on new life as it is attached to various issues or disciplines, such as “oral literacy’, ‘visual literacy’, ‘information literacy’, ‘media literacy’, ‘science literacy’ and even ‘emotional literacy’” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006, p. 20). Each of these different literacies can be seen as “a specific kind of competence, an ability to function with informational tools in the named domain, be it computers, geography, or something else” (Newman, 2002, p. 33). The academic literacies approach (Lea & Street, 1998, 2006) defines literacies in the plural. From this perspective, academic literacy is not definable in a singular form as it is not the same for individual students and is influenced by their own background, as well as the specific subject they are studying and the institutional context. Lea and Street (2006) state that the academic literacies approach “is concerned with meaning making, identity, power and authority, and foregrounds the institutional nature of what counts as knowledge in any particular academic context” (p. 369).

Constructivist learning theory

Social constructivism has been the learning theory of choice for a considerable amount of research into the use of Web 2.0 in tertiary education (Cochrane, 2012; Conole, 2010); Web 2.0's characteristics of peer to peer collaboration and user generated content appear to resonate well with the constructivist focus on student-centred, social, and collaborative activities. There are numerous examples of Web 2.0-based academic literacies learning initiatives that take a constructivist approach (Beckett, Amaro-Jiménez & Beckett, 2010; Snodgrass, 2011; Wingate & Dreiss, 2009), with students enabled to discover new information. Having the teacher provide minimal / no direction with students solving problems, either on their own or in groups (Biggs & Tang, 2011) can assist students with gaining entrance to the discourse of their discipline by discovery. However, for complex tasks, such as examining educational research methods, students may struggle to learn effectively without sufficient guidance from a teacher. From the cognitivist perspective, “[m]inimally guided instruction appears to proceed with no reference to the characteristics of working memory, long-term memory, or the intricate relations between them” (Kirschner, Sweller & Clark, 2006, p. 76).

Connectivist learning theory

The focus of constructivist learning theory is the knowledge construction of the individual (Harasim, 2012), but in a Web 2.0 context, learners can collaborate with other learners across networks, enabling shared knowledge creation. Differing from constructivist views of knowledge construction occurring within individuals, connectivist learning theory posits that knowledge construction occurs within networks between individuals (Siemens, 2004). Criticisms of connectivism are that it is not really a learning theory, but more of a guide for online pedagogy, and that existing theories can be adapted to sufficiently explain learning in a digital age (Kop & Hill, 2008). However, in attempting to reconcile the academic literacies approach with a theory of learning, connectivism perhaps offers an appropriate landscape. The academic literacies approach seeks to redress imbalances between what institutions prescribe academic literacy to be and what academic literacy actually is for individual students (Lea & Street, 1998) who come from highly individualised backgrounds. Because academic literacy can be taken as socially contested and individual, it is not appropriate for a lecturer to then

define one academic literacy for all students. Examples of connectivist approaches to learning and teaching academic literacies include: the use of social bookmarking for managing reading lists and notes (Dujardin, Edwards & Beckingham, 2012); students collaborating with peers to refine their academic writing through blogging (Dujardin, 2012); and the development of critical thinking skills to choose information when a learner needs it, and to have capacity to learn what is not yet conceptualised (Ravenscroft, 2011). Also, Cochrane worked with Journalism lecturers to shift assessment practices (Cochrane, Antonczak, Gordon, Sissons & Withell, 2012). The assessment involved students using Storify to collate comments from social media on a current news item, and then using mobile devices to provide critique of the social media comments. Compared with traditional essay assessments, student work on Storify demonstrated both more critique and creativity.

Method

Multiple case studies will be the design for data collection because case studies enable deeper understandings of how individuals act and interact within a particular context (Berg, 2007). The development of student academic literacies in a Web 2.0-based constructivist learning environment is the contemporary phenomenon to be investigated. The context is a postgraduate qualification at a New Zealand university. The bounded system (Yin, 2009) that the phenomenon occurs within is a semester long paper, with the units of analysis being individual students enrolled in the paper. To enable a potentially deep understanding of each case (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, and Sorensen, 2006), three sources of evidence will be analysed: a test of student academic literacy; face-to-face interviews; and samples of student writing both online and through traditional written assessments. Constructivist grounded theory methods of data analysis (Charmaz, 2006) will be employed. Because “[t]he analysis of case study evidence is one of the least developed and most difficult aspects of doing case studies” (Yin, 2009, p. 127), the well-established constant comparative analytic techniques of grounded theory provide a clear framework for data analysis.

The research will focus on the postgraduate student experience of one semester-long blended learning paper at a New Zealand university. The researcher is based in a university Student Learning Centre, and will work in collaboration with a Faculty-based lecturer. Academic literacies learning is embedded into the course content of this paper, with some student activity completed off-campus. For formative assessment tasks, students must generate their own blog posts, and also critique the blog posts of peers using a private Facebook community. Students also engage in informal discussions within the Facebook community, some of which are led by the lecturer, while others are spontaneously generated by students. Student experience of Facebook is varied, with most cohorts having had little or no experience of its use for learning and teaching purposes.

Expectations and call for feedback

This research can make positive contributions to the learning experiences of students and the teaching experiences of lecturers. Both of these communities grapple with the lived experiences of learning and teaching in an increasingly digital landscape. Rhetoric permeates this landscape: the educational benefits of Web 2.0; the argued virtues of both constructivist and connectivist learning theories; and the complexity of academic literacies learning which is embedded into subject content. Understanding more clearly academic literacies learning tasks that are embedded into subject content, that are Web 2.0-based, and that draw on either constructivist or connectivist learning theory could help teachers to enhance their practice. This could occur through the rigorous design of tasks for academic literacies learning embedded into course content; and appropriate use of Web 2.0 tools to facilitate these tasks.

Furthermore, as constructivism and connectivism are likely to influence the pedagogical decisions that lecturers make about how students can and should learn, the student experience of those decisions needs to be analysed. For any cohort of students who learn with Web 2.0, their learning experience is mediated by the lecturer and how Web 2.0 is blended with the overall curriculum. An analysis of this particular cohort of students may contribute to the creation of sound, theory driven Web 2.0-based learning tasks that effectively assist students in the development of their academic literacies. An outcome of this project could be the establishment of a robust blueprint for further research into how these tasks could be adapted for use with other student cohorts in a variety of disciplines. The author requests the invaluable feedback of learning technologists and academics within the Ascilite

community in order to refine and/or augment this proposed PhD research project.

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