



Distributed Digital Essay: Academia connects with social media

Fiona Nicolson

Learning and Teaching Centre
Macquarie University

Sherrie Love

Learning and Teaching Centre
Macquarie University

Dr Mitch Parsell

Faculty of Human Sciences
Macquarie University

A key challenge faced by higher education is the evolution of assessment tasks to better suit the participatory and collaborative way in which our students use the web. This paper provides a model for a distributed digital essay that incorporates academic rigour with the peer discourse that has become the norm for digitally literate scholars active in social media. Our model is derived from a community of inquiry approach and prioritises students' engagement with the academic literature in their discipline. The model empowers the students to extend their learning community beyond the boundaries of their particular student cohort into a professional network. Students produce a digital artefact in which they expound their evidence-based knowledge and also demonstrate how they have used social media to test and consolidate their understanding. We provide an example that demonstrates how the distributed digital essay task was integrated into an online, postgraduate unit with an inquiry-based approach to learning.

Keywords: distributed digital essay, assessment, social media, peer feedback, community of learning

Higher education must evolve in order to effectively meet the expectations and skills of a student population that has readily adopted popular social technologies (Kukulka-Hulme, 2012, p.247). "Students already spend much of their free time on the Internet, learning and exchanging new information through various resources, including social networks" (Johnson, Adams Becker, Cummins, Estrada, Freeman, and Ludgate, 2013, p.8). These students belong to a participatory online culture in which collaboration and networking are the norm. There are clearly significant benefits in engaging these skills in their university learning experiences. However this will require a definite shift towards using technologies that connect students to their peers in meaningful and challenging discourse, and a commitment to developing new methods of assessment that constructively align with these dynamic learning processes (Wasson and Vold, 2012, p.255; Biggs, 2003). This paper will provide an example of a new assessment task designed to engage students using the technologies from the participatory online culture that they embrace in their social lives, and it is also focused on supporting students to genuinely participate in the academic discourse of their discipline.

The disconnect: participatory online culture vs traditional LMS and assessment practices

Rovai (2003, p.5) advocates for assessment that "encourages discourse about learning" because collaborative discourse engenders a sense of community which increases student motivation and decreases attrition rates.

Unfortunately, although active peer collaboration and feedback are generally regarded as positive contributors to student learning in higher education, peer discourse has not been comprehensively integrated into online learning environments or into standard assessment practices. Online courses are often structured more traditionally whereby students are required to work independently on the course content and assessment tasks with limited connections with their peers. Furthermore, feedback on assessment tasks is often “controlled by and seen as the responsibility of teachers . . . [and] is still generally conceptualised as a transmission process” (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006, p.199). This means that students are likely to feel a disconnect between the participatory and collaborative online culture of their social lives, and their relatively sterile online learning environments using the institution’s learning management system. This disconnect is reinforced by the teacher-centred approach to assessment which is unlikely to “leverage the online skills learners have already developed independent of academia” (Johnson, Adams Becker, Cummins, Estrada, Freeman, and Ludgate, 2013, p.8). The distributed digital essay is a new assessment task that seeks to address these problems by extending the students’ learning community beyond their LMS to include professional and academic peers from their field of study and enabling students to utilise their online networking and collaboration skills to seek feedback from these peers on their learning. Ultimately the students produce an assessment artefact that demonstrates their knowledge and understanding that has been tested by their peers using social media.

Connecting with peers and building disciplinary knowledge

In contrast to most traditional LMS, social networking sites prioritise community and collaboration with peers (Arnold and Paulus, 2010, p.188). These sites have been credited with introducing “social scholarship” and “evolving the ways in which scholarship is accomplished in academia” (Greenhow, Robelia and Hughes, 2009, p.253). Social scholarship is embodied by “openness, conversation, collaboration, access, sharing and transparent revision” (Cohen, 2007, cited in Greenhow et al, 2009, p.253). Students are able to witness and participate in this social scholarship and they can use the networks to seek and provide formative peer feedback. This peer feedback has a key role in establishing a participatory culture of learning and it encourages students to value the process of constructing their knowledge in addition to presenting the final (and traditionally assessable) product (Wasson and Vold, 2012, p.256). Greenhow, Robelia and Hughes (2009, p.247) describe how the “validity of knowledge in Web 2.0 environments is established through peer review.” Knowledge is described as “decentralized, accessible, and co-constructed by and among a broad base of users” (Greenhow, Robelia and Hughes, 2009, p.247). This is aligned with the social constructivist theory of learning in which “learners actively construct knowledge within the challenging arenas of their learning environments” (Giridharan, 2012, p.734).

Akyol, Garrison and Ozden (2009, p.78) endorse a social constructivist approach to building online communities of learners and they define learners as “collaborative knowledge builders.” Garrison’s model facilitates the students’ generation of meaning and knowledge that is relative to themselves and their specific learning community (Swan, Garrison and Richardson, 2009). In contrast, the distributed digital essay model requires students to develop their knowledge relative to the existing disciplinary body of knowledge, not just relative to the peers in their learning community. By doing so, learners can contribute to an ongoing disciplinary discourse - progressing the knowledge in their chosen field, not simply increasing their own personal understandings. The distributed digital essay aims to contribute to the evolution of social scholarship for students entering as novices into the academia of their respective disciplines. The distributed digital essay embraces the participatory culture of learning offered by online collaboration and networking, however, it also prioritises the academic rigour of disciplinary research and evidence-based knowledge.

The Distributed Digital Essay in practice

The essential concept of the distributed digital essay is the students’ participation in the disciplinary discourse of their field by developing and testing knowledge claims within their academic and professional network of peers. The following model can be applied across a range of disciplinary areas.

This particular example of the distributed digital essay has been integrated into an online, postgraduate unit with an inquiry-based approach to learning. The students in the unit are expected to extend their foundational knowledge and understanding of child development through reading, reviewing and critiquing research. On completion of their postgraduate program, these students will usually enter working environments in which they may be the only staff member with a higher education background. The personal online network that students build in this unit can continue to provide them with access to their academic and professional peers, thus enabling them to continue their participation in the disciplinary discourse of their field as experienced

practitioners. Social media provide “the conditions in which knowledge is shared and new knowledge is created or exchanged” (Razmerita, Kirchner and Sudzina, 2009, p.1022).

Task Design and student support

In order to effectively integrate the distributed digital essay into a course, the teacher needs to consider the overall learning processes and the schedule of assessment. This involves linking the task directly with the learning outcomes of the course, planning the staging of the task across the length of the course, developing support resources, and, where possible, relating the task to other assessment items.

Depending on the students’ familiarity and willingness to engage with social media, they may require some explicit explanations of the rationale for including social media in an academic course. It is important that the students recognise the value of the task so that they embrace it as a key learning tool. It can be useful to provide an online guide and even a sample essay that students can refer to if they are feeling unsure about the requirements and expectations of the task. In our example, we provided an explanatory video, an online guide and a sample essay for students (Figure 1). It would be useful to inform students how much flexibility they have in the format of their final digital artefact. A drawback of providing a sample is that students tend to restrict themselves to re-producing their version of the sample and this can limit the students’ creativity. Providing a range of different options may mitigate this problem. The task design can be flexible and the format of the digital artefact can be chosen to best suit the discipline, the specific learning outcomes and the student demographic.

In our example, the artefact was a written text in which the students demonstrated their understanding and analysis of disciplinary research; and, how their ideas and ways of thinking about the literature had been impacted by their participation in social media. Students were encouraged to commence their online networking at the start of the course and then progressively build up their connections and participation throughout the session, culminating in the production of the digital artefact. Some students may lack the confidence to participate actively in an online community that includes academics and professionals. In this case, their own student cohort can be a source of encouragement and support. It may be helpful to include a discussion forum in the students’ LMS where they can express any concerns they have about their contributions to the broader online community which may at times appear intimidating.

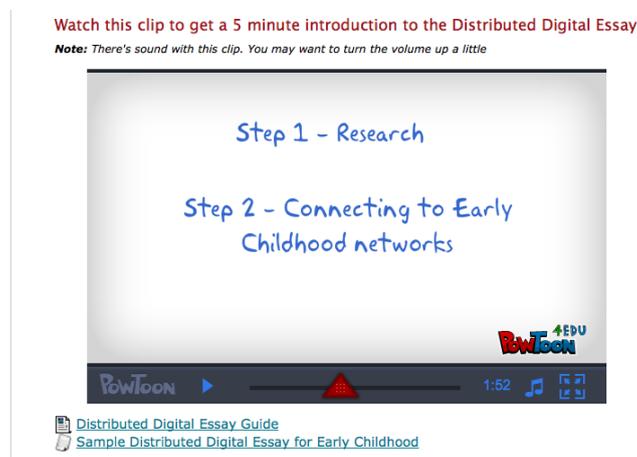


Figure 1: Screenshot from the LMS – online support resources for students

The Learning Processes

The process of academic inquiry

Based on their research of disciplinary literature using standard academic databases and journals, students start developing their understanding of the key concepts that relate to their area of interest. The students will formulate knowledge claims which are supported by robust, academic evidence and they will take these knowledge claims to discuss with their peers in the social media. This academic inquiry is an ongoing process throughout the course.

Getting connected and extending the online learning environment

At the start of the course, students create accounts on social media sites and explore posts that are relevant to their area of interest. They are encouraged to discover what academics, professionals and peers in other organizations are talking about, relate this to their academic inquiry where possible, and then connect with the relevant individuals and organisations. Ideally, teachers can provide a role model of an academic with a digital identity that is connected and participatory. If departments have their own Facebook page or blog, this can help students to start their networking with some familiar and relevant connections.

Engaging with the online community and collating findings using Storify

Having commenced their academic research and dabbled with social media, students are ready to navigate their way through the digital discourse (which can be noisy at times) to find and engage with voices to support and challenge their ideas and knowledge claims. Students need to initiate and/or find relevant conversations, tweets, posts, videos etc. which will provide a means for them to participate and contribute to the online community. Setting up a live Twitter feed relevant to the disciplinary area in the LMS can provide a helpful stimulus for students.

In order to adequately test their ideas and extend their understanding of the literature, students need to become active participants in their online community. This may be daunting for students who are inexperienced with social media, but the skills they acquire will enable them to stay connected with their professional, online community beyond their university studies. It's important to encourage students to go beyond simply lurking and observing online. Although Veletsianos and Navarrete (2012) argue that "lurking may be a vital form of participation."

Often another challenge with social media is efficiently collating findings and contributions. The distributed digital essay utilises a tool called Storify to help students to easily collect the social media posts that they find or contribute and integrate these into their distributed digital essay.

Writing the distributed digital essay and sharing it with peers

Having built up a collection of relevant links to social media sites, the students can construct a digital artefact in which the students expound their evidence-based knowledge and also demonstrate how they have used social media to test and consolidate their understanding (Figure 2). Storify enables students to publish their digital essay and distribute the URL throughout their learning community for further comment and feedback.

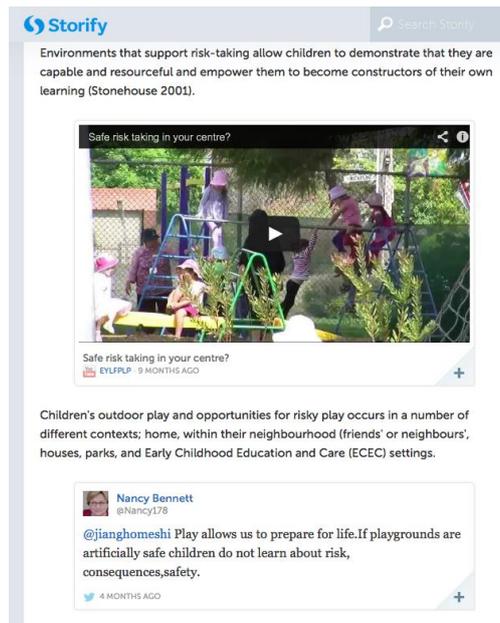


Figure 2: An extract from a sample distributed digital essay

One of the challenges in constructing the distributed digital essay is adjusting the register of the text to combine formal, academic, evidence-based writing with the more relaxed, social media voice. Students may also insert a more personal voice reflecting on what they learnt from their social media interactions. In our example, in addition to producing the digital artefact, students were asked to write a separate reflection explaining how social media had contributed to their thinking about the concepts raised in the academic literature. Interestingly, one student stated in the course evaluation: "... social media challenged my understanding of my chosen topic. Furthermore, it consolidated the knowledge I had gained through academic research by encouraging me to critically appraise..."

The distributed digital essay is an assessment task that creates an opportunity for students to give and receive feedback from peers in an online community that extends beyond the cohort on their LMS. As academic inquirers; students research, explore, analyse, question and formulate ideas in response to the body of knowledge in their discipline. The participatory online community created by social media is an ideal forum to test out these ideas or knowledge claims. Social media extends the inquiry process beyond academia. The connections made by students can be maintained as they become practitioners and continue to actively contribute to the evidence-based, disciplinary knowledge in their field.

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Author contact details:

Fiona Nicolson, fiona.nicolson@mq.edu.au

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