

Creativity in practice: social media in higher education

Belinda Allen

Learning and Teaching Unit/School of Education
The University of New South Wales

Helen Caple

School of the Arts and Media
The University of New South Wales

Kate Coleman

College of Fine Arts/Learning and Teaching Unit
The University of New South Wales

Tam Nguyen

Faculty of the Built Environment
The University of New South Wales

Creativity, both as a professional capability and as a personal attribute, is acknowledged as an important dimension of education for a fast-changing world, relevant to future practice in the professions and for learners and teachers. New social media tools, which place creation, publication and critique in the hands of web users, have been recognised as having a role in democratising creativity, making the means of production and distribution accessible to most of the developed world. Using these tools to facilitate learning activities in higher education can promote creativity and many other related capabilities: digital literacy, independent learning, collaboration and communication skills, and critical thinking. It requires creativity on the part of teachers to develop and manage learning environments and tasks that are not traditional and may be quite experimental. This paper asks some university teachers who are innovating their teaching by using social media to reflect on how creativity informs their practice and the learning of their students.

Keywords: creativity, social media, higher education, graduate capabilities, digital literacy

Creativity in Higher Education (HE)

In learning for the future, creativity as an aspirational graduate attribute in higher education is related to demands from business and industry for creative graduates able to devise innovative solutions to complex problems in the new millennium knowledge economies of the developed (and increasingly the developing) world (Amabile, 1996; Pink, 2005). Progressive educationalists have revived calls to embrace a holistic education that develops all aspects of human personality and potential, including creativity (Robinson, 2000; Jackson, 2006). Creativity can be understood as systemic – a product of personal creative activity within a particular context which supports and recognises it (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999). As a personal quality, creativity can be characterised more as a disposition than a specific skill, and related to identity formation rather than knowledge. Dispositional aspects of creativity include preparedness to take risks, curiosity and perseverance. Generic graduate capabilities such as independent learning, communication, critical thinking, problem-solving and inter-disciplinary practice can all relate to a disposition for creativity.

Creative teaching and learning

Academics and students perceive creativity as a learning outcome to be closely related to creative learning activities, and creative approaches in teaching and assessment (Fryer, 2006; McWilliam & Dawson, 2007). It has also been suggested that an effective way to teach creativity is to model creative practice for students (Sternberg, 1996). Taking a creative approach to teaching, which may encompass collaborative activity, incorporating fun and play, and devolving responsibility for learning to students, is likely to be challenging to most university teachers who have not themselves had such creative models. Creative dispositional qualities already mentioned such as risk-taking and collaboration, as well as a creative approach to ‘designing’ a learning environment and activities which support creativity, must be brought to the teaching situation. Teachers, no less than students, need the ability to critically reflect on their creative activities to ensure that outcomes are met.

Digital literacy for creative learning

Digital literacy is also emerging as a critical capability for the future. The Horizon Report for 2012 (New Media Consortium, 2012), which is concerned with identifying trends in technology and new media for education, identifies

several key trends relating to contemporary learning contexts and creative inquiry. These include the growing use of cloud-based technologies, the increasingly collaborative nature of work, and the more flexible and personalised nature of learning experiences. While a currently popular view is that the 'net generation' are 'digital natives' who are comfortable in a technology-mediated world, research indicates that student use of and skills with technologies are not uniform, and tend to be focused on ad hoc uses of established technologies (Kennedy et al, 2010). Simultaneous with shifts in technology use, ways of managing information in the world have evolved from ownership and guardianship of knowledge to 'knowledge networking' (Allen & Long, 2009), making digital literacy an important component of the information literacy that graduates must develop. Higher education needs to have a role in both enabling learners to manage the abundance of resources and relationships that are accessible via the internet, and in positioning them as leaders in the development and use of digital tools for knowledge management and production.

Social media for learning

The growth of the social software applications characterised as 'social media' that lie at the heart of Web 2.0 has been matched by the growing interest of educators who see this as an important extension of the closed functionality of the traditional Learning Management System (LMS) (Dalsgaard, 2006). A common theme underlying much current commentary on the educational web is how the user-participation and production functionality of social media opens up new approaches to learning and teaching, and challenges the traditional roles of learners and teachers (Allen, 2011; Downes, 2011). Social media tools, being socially-oriented and democratically organised, are not only more conducive to communication and collaboration, but control (and responsibility) are moving into the hands of the learner.

Technology-mediation of activities is now significant in everyday life and work, yet authentic contexts for integration of technology into pedagogy have been slow to develop. The kind of activities suggested by an authentic, learner-directed pedagogy have been hitherto poorly supported by learning technologies designed around teacher-centred pedagogy, and institutional administrative requirements. The NMC report (2012, p.6) warns that "Digital media literacy continues its rise in importance as a key skill in every discipline and profession", but "Institutional barriers present formidable challenges to moving forward in a constructive way with emerging technologies". The use of social media tools for teaching and learning is not systematically supported in most higher education institutions, hamstrung by policy issues around IP, copyright and security of data. However, many academics, finding that institutionally provided systems do not offer flexibility, are independently realising the benefits of innovating their teaching in this space.

Case studies

Following are examples from The University of New South Wales, where social media tools have been used to foster student interaction and participation. While creativity was not explicitly stated as a learning outcome in these instances, the course conveners reflect on how their ideas of creativity in teaching and learning were represented in the course design and its outcomes.

Collaboration and critique in Wikis (Helen Caple, School of the Arts and Media)

A first-year undergraduate media gateway course, 'Media, Society, Politics', makes use of the collaborative attributes of wikis in designing and assessing an online group assessment project. In terms of creativity, this project has significant implications both for the student learning experience and for the assessment protocol for the tutors involved in marking this project.

Like other social media technologies, wikis maximise the "architecture of participation" (Gross Davis, 2009, p. 181), by allowing multiple users to write and edit a web document. Versatility in content management and display in wikis means that contributors can reference a variety of different media types in the wiki page, including text, embedded (or externally linked) video, audio, pdfs, slideshows, and still images, to name but a few. Thus the architecture of the page is limited only by the creativity of the contributors.

At the same time, wikis provide complete transparency in who has contributed what and when to the page (since all page edits are tracked and stored in a page 'history'). Such transparency impacts greatly on how tutors are able to assess the group project. It is well-known that one of the major concerns with group work lies in how the project is assessed, both in terms of what is assessed (process and/or product) and how marks are to be allocated, for instance, to the group, to the individual, to be distributed among the members, through peer review (Lejk et al, 1996). Assessing the process may mean measuring the individual's contribution to the group or to the task, time spent on the project or the quality/quantity of work produced (Sharp 2006, Orr 2010), and gathering reliable evidence of such contributions is a major challenge. Assessing only the final product leads to inevitable inequities in the allocation of grades where the efforts of hard working students may be missed and students who 'free ride' are unjustly rewarded (James et al, 2002, p. 48; Pieterse and Thompson, 2010, p. 356). Wikis provide creative solutions to such issues in that they allow tutors to monitor, and consequently assess, both the *process* and the *product* of the group task, at the same time as exposing free-

riders. One of the benefits to teaching and learning of this approach is shifting the focus from measuring the final outcome of a task towards supporting the learning process.

Managing communications and networking in Ning (Tam Nguyen, Faculty of the Built Environment)

A case study was conducted using a blended learning environment for design students, combining the face-to-face studio environment with an online social network to facilitate student publication, communication and autonomy. The study aimed to examine the use of a web-assisted model of assessment, interaction and publication as a mechanism for measuring the effectiveness of inclusive design learning when supported by the constructs of social interaction.

The face-to-face studio environment is typical of most practice-based forms of design education. Tutorial groups are based around small groups of students in a problem-solving setting led by individual studio tutors. Studio activities involve presentations and discussions, aimed at facilitating common understandings of design limits and possibilities, and develop into individual consultations, aimed at refining design ideas. One of the key challenges with this format is the time required to complete an activity with a student and the teacher-centric nature of class management. Students often spend long periods of solitary time, waiting for their allocated consultation with their tutor.

Ning, an online social network service, was introduced to encourage more student interaction and publication. The *Ning* site was designed for visual appeal and social presence. Social presence here is defined as the “degree of salience of the other person in the interaction and the consequent salience of the interpersonal relationships” (Jusoff & Khodabandelou, 2009). It is also seen as the ability of learners to project themselves socially and affectively into a community of inquiry (Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, & Archer, 2001). Social presence is a complicated construct and involves privacy, social relationships, communication styles, the nature of the task, feedback, and immediacy (Tu, 2002), and can have a significant impact on student progression, improved learning, motivation and engagement (Jusoff & Khodabandelou, 2009; Richardson & Swan, 2003). The *Ning* site was centred around an ‘activity feature’ on the front page, which contained a stream of up-to-the-minute activity within the site. Students could immediately see and interact with tutors’ comments, developmental work in student blogs, course discussions and announcements. They could also establish their own relationships with peers, at varying levels of intimacy. The social presence of the site produced intense communication between students and staff, ranging from social chats to critical review of work. Tutor feedback was driven by student initiative, shifting the responsibility of learning to the student. Feedback from both students and staff indicated the value of the social network to their sense of identity and belonging to a community of learners. It is clear that this social media technology is able to enhance identity formation and collaboration, promoting better sharing, inclusion and enjoyment of course activities. Online social interaction can greatly enrich engagement for both student and staff, encouraging a more creative approach to learning and teaching.

Independent learning in Facebook (Kate Coleman, College of Fine Arts)

Is creativity in the execution or the thinking that encourages participation online?

The act of creativity in this teaching instance was establishing a social media collaborative site to extend student discussion from the end of the lecture to the tutorial and back to the lecture in a learning loop. For a teacher who is an avid user of social media and has a strong philosophy in utilising the best technologies for student learning and community, *Facebook* offered a space to develop this community, to also encourage creative thought and ultimately creativity in community. The creativity that encouraged the students was the act of participating in an ever-changing discussion that continued to grow and develop. This group of students is in the creative industries, and students who graduate and seek employment in this field require good networking, strong communication skills and the ability to self promote (Bridgstock, 2005). With this in mind, *Facebook* was selected to be the predominant social community space alongside the LMS, *Moodle*, for lecture summaries, slides and recordings and a micro blog, *Today'sMeet*, for student commentary in lectures.

Utilising social media in face-to-face teaching doesn't require changing the course design, its function is to engage the students in the act of developing and sharing learning content and resources. Use of these tools for social and creative learning also encouraged a growth in digital literacy among these students, who developed a practice of sharing *YouTube* links related to lectures, including links to exhibition openings, student run projects and assessment topic discussion. Student posts were content- and course-related, supportive of assessment and driven by student need. Creating a student-owned page outside the LMS allowed for creative freedom in writing, sharing, reflecting and publishing of content related and course related material. To promote student ownership of the activity, students could nominate as co-administrators so that they too could manage requests and add students to the group, making enrolment easier and quicker.

Positive outcomes included increased interaction between students and peers, students and lecturer, and students and tutors, which led to development of a learning community with shared resources. An unexpected but important outcome was that students contextualised their learning in relationship to other courses in the degree programs, as they began

quite early in the semester posting queries regarding other courses, asking for advice on assessment from other course components and chatting generally about their learning in the program. In this way students developed a way of working informally in *Facebook* in the context of their learning.

Conclusion

In these instances of course activities utilising social media, teachers were asked to retrospectively consider aspects of the teaching or learning that they consider to be 'creative'. For teaching, creativity was seen to be inherent in:

- taking a creative approach to designing the learning activity and learning environment
- being creative in their role as a teacher by both providing and participating in social communications
- becoming familiar with the social media tools that facilitate this approach through personal use and experimentation.

For students, creativity was promoted by expectations that they:

- collaborate and contribute a range of media inputs
- publish and reflect on instances of their own creative output, and give feedback to others
- participate in a community of learning where they are expected to contribute course resources.

Creativity requires a propensity to take risks, and a preparedness to fail, but this is not generally supported in the current university environment. The kinds of activities described here provide a moderated environment for students to practice being more creative in activities and communications. However, their propensity to take risks is dependent upon how these activities will be assessed. The potential of these technologies to promote formative assessment, and assessment of process rather than product is helpful, as is the opportunity for students to develop their own abilities for self and peer assessment. These kinds of activities also require risk-taking on the part of the teacher - to be prepared to assume a role as co-learner, and to experiment with technologies that do not have the institutional imprimatur. To achieve the potential for learning for the future offered by new and emerging technologies, institutions must support such experimental practice.

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Author contact details:

Belinda Allen, belinda@unsw.edu.au; Helen Caple, helen.caple@unsw.edu.au; Kate Coleman, kathryn.coleman@unsw.edu.au; Tam Nguyen, tam.nguyen@nida.edu.au.

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