

Just what is being reflected in online reflection?: new literacies for new media practices

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Abstract

This paper argues that new literacies are required when reflective practices in higher education move online. Online reflective writing is profoundly influenced by wider cultural understandings of blogging and personal disclosure and risk online. We can see in current blogging practices a convergence of the rise of the concept of personal branding (Peters 1997, Lair et al 2005), and what Scott describes as the “cultural tendency to seek out confessional narratives of self-disclosure” (2004, 92). This convergence exposes a number of tensions: between self-promotion and authenticity, between accusations of narcissism and pressures to confess, and between moral panics around privacy and safety and a growing sense that online invisibility equates to personal and professional negligence, and that the more presence the better. As students negotiate the management of personal, academic and sometimes also professional voices in blogs and reflective e-portfolios, they bring in to play literacies which are new not in their substance but in their modality. The paper emerges from an ongoing research project exploring how students and teachers negotiate issues of identity, authenticity, ownership, privacy and performativity in high-stakes online reflection in higher education. It draws on data from 14 interviews with students and lecturers from three university programmes in the UK which have a high-stakes reflective component. These are a subset of the data generated as part of my project (31 interviews and 15 reflective artefacts from across 8 programmes covering face-to-face, online, undergraduate and postgraduate contexts, and subject areas including education, social work, built environment, health, and law). I propose a set of (often conflicting) norms and expectations widely associated with blogging. These cluster around themes of authenticity, risk, pretense, commodification, othering and narcissism. I explore how these are reflected in the assumptions and practices of students and teachers, and go on to argue for greater attention to be given to the nature of *online* reflective writing, and a more explicit and critical engagement with the tensions it embodies.

Keywords

Online reflection, blogging, culture, higher education, literacies

Introduction

In this paper I argue that new literacies are required when reflective practices in higher education move online. Online reflective writing in education, whether publicly visible, limited to small groups of learners, or restricted to just a student and their teacher, is profoundly influenced by wider cultural understandings of blogging and personal disclosure and risk online. As Carpenter contends, “[electronic] environments allow for and even encourage active integration and dynamic interaction, resulting in a mixing of genres and literacy practices that does not respect conventional categories, divisions, or dichotomies, including the border that separates... the popular from the academic” (2009, p.144). This is due not only to the homogenising power of digital interfaces, as Carpenter claims, but also to the discursive power of narratives of promise and threat surrounding and permeating digital cultures (Hand 2008).

Reflective writing and practices are an extremely important element of teaching and learning (and, increasingly, assessment) in many disciplines, particularly those with a professional or vocational focus. My stance is that reflective practices in higher education always produce certain subject positions and power relations which are too often ignored or overlooked. This leaves students and teachers to negotiate extremely tricky practices such as online reflection and high-stakes reflection without a strong critical awareness of their complexity. Reflection in education is generally grounded in a humanist discourse of a ‘true’ or ‘central’ self which can be revealed, understood, recorded, improved or liberated through the process of writing about thoughts and experiences. This discourse underpins the various projects of reflective writing in higher education as described by (for example) Boud, Keogh and Walker (1985), Brockbank and McGill (1998) and Moon (1999). However, it is problematic for two main reasons: it masks the increasingly invasive character of educational practices which demand confession and self-surveillance as evidence of progress and learning, and it assumes a knowable, malleable yet

cohesive self at its centre. These problems are greatly exacerbated by the increasingly common use of online reflection.

Blogging is a genre which privileges individual voice, addressivity, and a blurred distinction between public and private spheres (Walker 2008). We can see in current blogging practices a convergence of the rise of the concept of personal branding (Peters 1997, Lair et al 2005), and what Scott describes as the “cultural tendency to seek out confessional narratives of self-disclosure” (2004, 92). This convergence exposes a number of tensions: between self-promotion and authenticity, between accusations of narcissism and pressures to confess, and between moral panics around privacy and safety and a growing sense that online invisibility equates to personal and professional negligence, and that the more presence the better. As students negotiate the management of personal, academic and sometimes also professional voices in blogs and reflective e-portfolios, they bring in to play literacies which are new not in their substance but in their modality. Literacies are socially situated and multiple practices (Barton, Hamilton and Ivanič 2000; Lillis 2003; Lea and Street 2009), and writing both reflects and constructs identities (Ivanič 1998). The context of writing reflectively *online* is different from other forms of reflective writing, with different sorts of implications for the identities of the student-writers, in the ways I will set out below.

The paper emerges from an ongoing research project exploring how students and teachers negotiate issues of identity, authenticity, ownership, privacy and performativity in high-stakes online reflection in higher education. It draws on data from 14 interviews with students and lecturers from three university programmes in the UK which have a high-stakes reflective component. These are a subset of the data generated as part of my project (31 interviews and 15 reflective artefacts from across 8 programmes covering face-to-face, online, undergraduate and postgraduate contexts, and subject areas including education, social work, built environment, health, and law). The interview extracts cited in this paper have been anonymised and pseudonyms used in place of real names.

In what follows I propose a set of (often conflicting) norms and expectations widely associated with blogging. These cluster around themes of authenticity, risk, pretense, commodification, othering and narcissism. I explore how these are reflected in the assumptions and practices of students and teachers, and go on to argue for greater attention to be given to the nature of *online* reflective writing, and a more explicit and critical engagement with the tensions it embodies.

Authenticity: blogs should be authentic and honest

Reflective educational practices have always demanded confession and certain kinds of stories about the self (Hargreaves 2004, Devas 2004, Ross 2008). However, to move online is to tap in to new modes of representing the self in what can feel like an especially public or surveilled space.

Students in my study were at pains to stress that they are both honest and authentic in their online writing. For some this is perceived as a requirement of their course:

I can't remember whether they said you know 'make sure you're creative and honest and free' but I felt like that was part of the criteria somehow, whether explicit or implicit. (Alex, PG student)

While for others, the motivation to be genuine is experienced as natural or intrinsic:

I don't really see online as being separate to everything else, and so there isn't any difference to how I present myself there to anywhere else. ...I'm not going to make no effort online, but I'm not going to make any effort to cover up, you know... maybe it's slightly more formal in the blog because I know it's going to be assessed, but it's the same, there's definitely a voice in there that I think if you had a look at my personal blog you you could see a definite, you'd go 'okay I can tell these are the same person'. (Megan, PG student)

Some lecturers interpret this honesty as being amplified by reflecting at a distance:

some of them are very very honest and up front in their weblogs in a way which I really doubt that they would be if, if the pedagogy was a, a face to face you know course with a, a written diary or something. (Gwen, lecturer, PG)

or by the solitary, asynchronous context of online reflection:

some of them were reporting some quite you know personal stuff about feeling afraid and, ... there's something about the, I don't know whether it's the fact it's people, you know enter their, you know enter their details and write these things in the wee small hours of the morning when, you know, they've had a few beers or something... and and it's almost like a a confession, like people write in their diaries about. (Peter, lecturer, UG)

Bloggers often appear to see their practice as not only necessarily authentic, but visibly so, and reflective of a knowable self (Holbrook 2006). As Reed comments, “[bloggers] treat weblogs as straightforward indexes of self; they commonly assert that ‘my blog is me’” (2005, p.227). The perception is that audiences expect and assess the authenticity of a blogger’s voice: “aware of the constant possibility that a fictional text may be posing as non-fiction, readers online have been exhaustive in investigating suspicious texts” (Freidrich 2007, p.62-3). This is coupled with increasing comfort with self-disclosure. As Dyson (1998) has argued, being online is reconfiguring what privacy and display mean, and how they are experienced:

As people feel more secure in general on the Net, they will become accustomed to seeing their words recorded and replayed. They will no longer feel uncomfortable being on display, since everyone around them is on display too... Everyone has personal preferences for privacy, but they are influenced by the surrounding culture and by the surrounding economy. (p.275)

Risk: sharing too much information is dangerous

Against this is set a powerful discourse of the erosion of privacy and the dangers of too much online disclosure. Many students and teachers experience online disclosure as risky in the sense that it is or has the potential to become public, and to be misused:

I had a guy come to see me yesterday with a [public web] portfolio... and I just said to him ‘look, you’ve given up enough information here if someone really wants to, to claim your identity’ and he said to me ‘what do you mean?’ and I said ‘name, address, date of birth, family name’ and he went ‘ooh my god’ and said ‘so can you take that down off your [portfolio] now, can you sort it out’, and I and we went through various documents that were on there to do with his portfolio and I said ‘I’d like that off, I’d like that off, I’d like that off and I’d’ and it was ‘no no you’ll mark me down’ and I said ‘no I won’t. I won’t mark you down.’ (Sam, lecturer, UG)

The most common approach to these fears is to withdraw from or remove what is seen as ‘personal’:

Jen: how come you didn’t put, be more sort of explicit about the kind of the depths of your soul or however you put it?

Dave (UG student): Um, because, I mean, again because you’re not quite sure who’s going to be reading it, or because [pause] and what I was writing in in the blog was honest I just, you know I just wasn’t going to you know go in to the depths.

but sometimes not before it is too late:

Adele (PG student): the first entry I was maybe, that was when I was writing quite a lot about my concerns and then um I was sort of writing, I think I, I wrote that ‘I’m not quite sure that this course is really what I want to be doing’ and um that it’s sort of taking the right, right direction and things like that, and I felt afterwards that maybe that was being too open, I wished I hadn’t written that.

Nevertheless, perhaps in deference to the notion of authenticity discussed above, students do not routinely change or edit their writing after the fact. This tension – that it is technically possible to revise online texts, but that to do so would be to break what Lejeune refers to as the ‘autobiographical pact’ (Holbrook 2006).

Much has been written about the moral panics surrounding internet safety and risk, especially in relation to young people (Hope 2008, Carrington 2007), and as Efimova and Grudin (2007) argue, “people are not careful”.

The result is an undercurrent of fear, danger and caution which is certainly affecting how students and teachers approach their online reflective practices.

Pretense: no one is really themselves online

A third narrative around blogging and online presence in general is that, in contrast to the notion of authenticity and the associated riskiness of online disclosure, the web is a medium which facilitates deception. Research around online dating (Ellison et al 2006) and teenagers' self-presentation in social networking (Bortree 2005), for example, emphasises the careful and self-conscious crafting of identity which goes on in spaces which are, for one reason or another, high-stakes. This is a delicate operation, however, as the appearance of authenticity remains extremely important.

In educational contexts, I have previously suggested that students may commit with extra intensity to 'authenticating' the self they perform in reflection online, in order to regain or maintain a sense of control in a digital space which invites them, as Bayne (2005) has argued, towards a dangerous fluidity (Ross 2008). One lecturer in my study explained how her students embraced and even demanded their tutors' presence in their reflective space:

I've been able to log on and see what they've they've been doing, literally on a daily basis if I wanted to. We did give the students the option to not have me do that and to take me off that facility. What was interesting was, the students were all unanimous in that, no no no, they wanted that. Because they saw that almost as um threatening if you will, um you know it was like big brother watching over. Um, and because you're in a position of power you can [laughingly] pass or fail the students, what they were actually saying was that made them think about how to use it and how to behave in in terms of recording their reflective journal. (Maria, lecturer, UG)

And several students described tutor presence (or perceived presence) as motivating:

*Jen: did you feel like [your tutor] was reading everything you were writing, did you?
Alice (PG student): I, I chose to believe that she was reading it. [laughter]
Jen: Okay. And did that help to motivate you?
Alice: That was definitely motivating. Yeah. Yeah definitely.*

At the same time, students discuss being careful in a number of ways about how they present themselves in their online reflection. There is always the question of what should not be said, as we have seen, and about how to put a 'best face forward', which we will turn to shortly.

Commodification: your online presence is your personal brand

There is increasingly the notion that it is essential for success in today's world to cultivate and manage a highly visible "personal brand". This discourse is managerial and market-driven:

A strong personal brand identity ideally can endure for decades... To be successful, aspirants must adapt to the growing maturity of the marketplace, competitive threats, changes in social mores and values, proliferation of communication channels, and other factors that serve to challenge brand resilience. (Rein et al 2005, 349)

Some students, taking this to heart, are very concerned about getting their online reflections 'right' in the first instance, and wary of losing control of their message online:

It felt safer writing it in a Word document first. There's something about writing directly you know into an online format whatever that is more [pause] live I suppose... I need to be absolutely sure that what I'm writing is what I want to write because it might it might disappear onto the internet at any time, you know? [laugh] ...maybe it's something to do with um what you, sort of preconceptions of what a blog is and what the internet is ...you know, that blogs are very public things. (Alice, PG student)

Personal branding goes hand in hand with a stated need to stand out in what is often referred to as an 'attention economy' (Lanham 2007). Here again, students are aware of and engaged with the possibilities for their reflective online spaces, even if it is not immediately intended for a wider audience:

there's something quite motivating and engaging about just publishing something even if it's only to one person... if I wanted to I could share it publicly and I could promote it and I could get people to look at it. And even though I'm not doing that I kind of know that I could. (Alex, PG student)

And here we come full circle back to authenticity, as “an attention economy demands that members live an open life. Privacy ... is less a matter of what people know about oneself and is more about avoiding constraints placed by the people who pay attention” (Jacobs 2008, online).

At the same time, though, the archive constitutes a form of compulsory memory over which individuals have little control: “we do not produce our databased selves, the databased selves produce us” (Simon 2005, 16). Database-driven technologies for *storing* the data produced in online reflection may, in the case of public or potentially public reflection, produce a radical recontextualisation, as “digital archives allow situational context to collapse with ease. ... search engines can collapse any data at any period of time” (boyd 2001, 33). This is the dangerous undercurrent of the rhetoric of empowerment and professionalisation that blogging carries with it.

Othring: what kind of person would share that with the whole world?

An important aspect of popular narratives of blogging is that they are almost always constructed by outsiders who examine blogging culture and practices from a conspicuous distance. There is a discourse of othering running through many if not most media reports, editorials and even academic literature (for example, Nardi et al, 2004) on the subject, and blogging is very often represented as the sort of thing that *other kinds of people* would do. Sometimes blogging behaviour is even pathologised, as in Buffardi and Campbell (2008) and Jacobs (2003), who claims that “the very interactive nature of blogging makes it innately supportive of both exhibitionistic and voyeuristic behaviours” (p2).

This tendency to view bloggers as strange or ‘other’, if not misguided, extends to some of the teachers I spoke with:

I [pause] I don't know why people blog. I, I'm not, it doesn't appeal particularly. [pause] I can see having a public voice on the web would be nice, but it assumes that people are interested in what you've got to say and it means that you know that you have to have interesting things to say every week or twice a week, and that's not really a pressure that I particularly want but, a lot of people obviously do, so. (Gwen, lecturer, PG)

I think there's a big psychological risk to being online too much. You know why do we want to go out and, I don't know ... I'll tell you what I think it is, I think it's this celebrity, cult of celebrity thing. (Sam, lecturer, UG)

Students, too, make comments which emphatically demonstrate their non-blogger status:

a lot of students will start by saying 'oh my god I hate blogging, why are you, why are you asking me to do this?' (Gwen, lecturer, PG)

I don't read other blogs really. I'm just not that interested. If people have got something to tell me they'll come and tell me. And I'm not in to the big brother idea. I've never watched that programme. I just, um I don't see the fascination that some people have with knowing everything about certain people's moves. (Fiona, UG student)

Narcissism: bloggers are shallow and self-obsessed

Guadagno et al (2008) claim that bloggers are predisposed towards neuroticism, while Curtain (2006, online) characterises the primary emotion of the blogger as one of anxiety:

Anxiety may be the primary emotion associated with giving accounts of blogging, and perhaps of blogging itself — Do I update enough? Why don't I write? Who is reading me? Why aren't there more? What do they think about what I say? Have I said enough about enough... (Curtain 2006, online)

This anxiety is tied most closely to fears of not being seen, and Mallan argues that it is part and parcel of the construction of “shifting subject positions” online:

These subject positions are not just ontological states, but inevitably entail a politics of visibility, both at the personal level and at the level of technological infrastructure. It is this ‘visibility’ which gives rise to epithets of narcissism and susceptibility attributed to the ‘Look-at-me generation’ (Orlet, 2007). (Mallan 2009, 51-2)

Some students are happy to claim and perhaps subvert these less flattering descriptions:

I'm a show off and loudmouth by nature ... So, I kind of feel like I'm happy for anybody to see sort of anything about me, I'm the sort of person who has a public profile on Facebook. [laughter] (Megan, PG student)

But students are not immune to anxieties when they are reflecting online, especially when they are aware that their teachers can see their work at any time, and may be looking. It is notable, I think, how closely Charles’ questions here echo Curtain’s above:

this kind of kind of dependency like one gets hooked on cigarettes or something [laughter], one kind of gets hooked on the tutor and thought, you know, ‘oh, why is she taking so long to mark this?’, you know ‘why aren’t I getting any feedback now?’, and it wasn’t long at all! ... ‘oh, she’s forgotten about me, oh that’s a real shame’. ‘Oh, didn’t I make more impression than that?’ [laugh] (Charles, PG student)

Conclusion

There is a growing openness in higher education to an e-learning agenda which positions new digital ‘tools’ as the answer to market needs, globalisation, and a new generation of so-called digital native consumer-students, without an accompanying critical stance which would support students and teachers to engage creatively and carefully with digital practices and cultures (Clegg et al, 2003; Goodfellow and Lea 2007; Bayne and Ross 2010). These tools and environments are not innocent nor culturally neutral, though, as they are “inscribed with social meaning, power relations, possibilities for and restrictions on the expression of personal identity” (Goodfellow and Lea 2007, p.128), and their use in higher education can produce many tensions and issues. So, as students negotiate the management of personal, academic and sometimes also professional voices in blogs and e-portfolios, they need new digital literacies and critical perspectives, not just technical skills.

Some university teachers are actively exploring these new literacies and perspectives, and are both excited and challenged by what they are finding. For example, Hughes and Purnell (2008) have been working with e-portfolios, and are concluding that:

the new landscapes may offer exciting ‘openings’ (Stronach and MacLure, 1997) for learning and teaching that support the shift from traditional anxious academic literacy practices of monologic addressivity to a more fluid and exciting literacy ‘infidelity’ allowing for increasing dialogue and exchange within student groups (p.151).

Indeed, the tensions that online reflective practices embody have the potential to be productive and to push us towards greater accountability and awareness of issues of power, identity and voice. Tensions and problems in this area will not be erased, so instead we should look at how we can most ethically engage and support students in these environments, with as full an understanding of their complexity and troublesomeness as possible. The research from which this paper emerges is ongoing, and will continue to propose both issues to be attended to and strategies for improving online reflection.

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