

The spectacle and the placeholder: digital futures for reflective practices in higher education

Jen Ross

Institute of Education, Community and Society, School of Education, University of Edinburgh. jen.ross@ed.ac.uk

Abstract

Discourses of reflective writing practices in higher education often demand an orientation towards writing which is highly individual and self-motivated, and which does not acknowledge the socially situated nature of reflective practice. At the same time, the reality of most reflective writing in an educational context, especially when it is produced for assessment purposes, is one of obligation, tacit and explicit criteria, and an audience in the form of a teacher or assessor which must be catered to. The tensions inherent in compulsory reflection have been addressed by some of the literature on reflection, but many authors and teachers have attempted to keep such tensions at bay by ignoring or denying the addressivity and performativity of these practices. This leaves students in a difficult position, where they must be seen to reflect in a way that meets the criteria without appearing to be strategic, knowing or audience-focused. Online reflection can be used to rethink the humanist underpinnings of reflection, allowing teachers and students to question concepts such as ‘authenticity’, ‘consistency’ and ‘development’. By acknowledging the challenges and possibilities of digitality in a high-stakes reflective practice context, we can open these practices up to generative critique and creative reworking, and develop a pedagogy of risky, creative, fragmented digital reflection. Two concepts underpin the proposed pedagogy for online reflection set out in this paper: the *spectacle*, and the *placeholder*. The spectacle acknowledges performance, audience, and surveillance, and suggests a playful and knowing orientation towards seeing and being seen. The placeholder gestures towards speed and partiality, and offers fragmentation, appropriation and creativity in the form of the remix. These concepts offer teachers and researchers an alternative vision for reflection that makes the best of what digital environments have to offer, and claims addressivity and performance as useful aspects of learning and teaching in a reflective mode.

Keywords

online reflection, humanism, digital, creativity, authenticity, performance, fragmentation

Introduction

There is general agreement in the literature on reflection and learning that ‘reflection’ is a contested and sometimes confusing term. Nevertheless, the key literature on reflection and reflective writing in higher education point to reflection as being above all concerned with individual experience and progress (Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 1985; Brockbank & McGill, 1998; Moon, 1999). This is the ground on which reflective writing is justified as a meaningful measure or process of learning, even when it is compulsory, audience-focused or otherwise high-stakes. A pervasive humanist narrative of a true self which can be revealed, understood, recorded, improved or liberated through the process of writing about thoughts and experiences is by and large taken for granted in literature that presumes autonomous selfhood, rationality and progress as the natural goals of deep or authentic learning. Reflection relies on a humanist self (Fenwick, 2000, p.248) for its central claims about progress and experience to make sense.

The humanist assumptions justifying reflective practices in higher education have been identified and critiqued on a number of theoretical and pedagogical grounds in recent years. A small number of authors have proposed ways of looking more critically at reflection, particularly in relation to problems of “authenticity”, tensions around audience and assessment (Ross, in press), and the performativity of reflective writing (Bleakley, 1999; Clegg, 2004; Edwards & Nicoll, 2006; Erlandson, 2005; Fendler, 2003; Gilbert, 2001; Smyth, 1992). However, most literature on both offline and online reflection makes no attempt to address these assumptions. This is

especially problematic in relation to online reflection because moving reflection online creates some new tensions and challenges (Ross, 2012) that make questions about the purpose and nature of reflection in formal education even more urgent. I believe we are in a moment of digital transition, as Boon and Sinclair (2010) describe it, in terms of online reflection in higher education. We have an opportunity to move further into, rather than retreat from, the unfamiliarity that online reflection brings, and to generate new perspectives on practices that will otherwise continue to be highly problematic for students and for teachers.

We require a new way of thinking about online reflection that is more attuned to its performative and digital nature. What is a pedagogy for audience-focused, digital, fragmented reflection? Two concepts underpin my pedagogy for online reflection: the *spectacle*, and the *placeholder*. The spectacle acknowledges performance, audience, and surveillance, and suggests a playful and knowing orientation towards seeing and being seen. The placeholder gestures towards speed and partiality, and offers fragmentation, appropriation and creativity in the form of the remix. The spectacle entails a shift in thinking about what reflection is for, and what it does, and the placeholder provides a way of actually producing reflection differently. The two concepts can work together to produce a new vision of online reflection.

Some of what is discussed in this paper is inspired by my experiences in co-developing and teaching a course on the MSc in E-learning at the University of Edinburgh. This course is called “E-learning and Digital Cultures” (EDC), and it makes use of strategies of visibility, openness, remix and fragmentation to encourage students to explore their own engagement with digital cultures, individually and as a group. Since its inception in 2009, the course has been completely open to the web, and students are assessed in part on the basis of a ‘lifestream’. The lifestream is an aggregated stream of content automatically pulled in from their activities across the web, including blogging and microblogging, social bookmarking, and collections of ‘liked’ and created content on a range of other web-based platforms. EDC is not mainly or explicitly about ‘reflection’, but it has features which can inform the more digital mode of self-representation that is needed to move online reflection forward.

The spectacle

In the social sciences, the spectacle has mostly been theorised, following Debord, as the ghastly antithesis of authenticity – as obsessed with the surface, the image and the act of looking (rather than being or encountering), which renders the world “hyperreal”, “self-referential” and “abstract” (Harris & Taylor, 2005, p.101). Consumption and access are privileged over context and experience (p.102). There is little to celebrate, it would seem, in a world made up entirely of superficiality, of passive spectators, and of commodification. However, there is in the current digital moment another conceptualisation of the spectacle which can offer an alternative: not authenticity, but participation and creation.

Mid- to late-20th century theories of the spectacle take little or no account of the *creation* of the spectacle, because they are so preoccupied with the effects of its consumption. As Dean (2010) has observed, this made sense at a time when most images were produced in a context of “broadcast media”, but offers no way to think about what she calls the “reflexive circuit” of social media and user-generated content (pp.108-9). As Bayne (2008) points out, “the incursions of the digital add a mutable new dimension to decades of theorising of the visible and visual in culture” (p.395). The digital positions the spectacle within circulations of power and authorship, and needs alternative perspectives through which to theorise the spectacle for spaces where people create, appropriate *and* consume.

Digital visual culture offers a connection to theories of production and consumption found in art and film theory (Nixon, 2003, p.410). In both film and art theory, the apparent position of the spectator is neither absolute nor natural; it is variously shaped, contested, disguised and played with by filmmakers and artists (Fried, 1980; Mulvey, 1975). Silverman (1992) understands these sorts of complex practices as hiding a breakdown of the “binarization” between spectacle and spectator (p.151). The visibility and theatricality of the spectacle comes from being crafted with spectators in mind, with a view to impressing them with performances and displays. However, students writing reflectively, and teachers reading their writing, are neither purely the spectacle nor the spectator. Where students display ‘themselves’, knowingly and partially, they are both within the picture and the representative of the gaze. Teachers are equally subject to the gaze of the Other through their students’ attempts to write for them. Student-writers are writing to be seen, to produce an image of themselves and to engage their audience. As teachers, we should help them produce digital spectacles of reflection that acknowledge the audience(s) for their work, and craft the work explicitly towards those audiences.

Considering reflective accounts in terms of being “convincing” rather than “true” might offer a way forward for online reflection. It is helpful to consider what a spectacle of conviction might entail. In essence, conviction should be seen as an aesthetic rather than a narrative gesture. Narrative implies humanist concerns with coherence and consistency, and these concerns have been significantly challenged by theories of digitality and online subjectivity (Poster, 1996). The ‘webness’ of online reflection offers new possibilities for aesthetic, audience-focused practices, and we need these particularly where student reflection is to be assessed or otherwise inspected. Webness offers the screen as a surface where multimodality, hypertextuality and bricolage can be played out, and where dialogue can be foregrounded. It also shows how audience might be able to be wider than teachers may have previously assumed possible. Bringing students together in their online reflective spaces produces new kinds of discourse, where students “call out” to each other, not just to their teacher or assessor :

Now that the shift of addressivity was established we began to explore the creative potential of storytelling in this online environment. The group shared metaphors, music, image and video as their reflective confidence grew. The digital/digitised stories were explored with reference to theories and lived experiences and rooted in the ongoing shared story of becoming a teacher. (Hughes & Purnell, 2008, p.149)

Opening reflective practices in this way can provide students with an unavoidable understanding of the visibility of what they are producing. This has been one of the best features of the EDC course: students engage energetically with one another in the space of their personal blogs, and the audience of peers makes itself felt through a vibrant culture of comments, tweets and cross-linkages. Occasionally others outside the course have become involved in conversations with students on Twitter or in the blogs as well, and student awareness that this can happen adds an extra dimension to the addressivity of their practices in the course spaces. Their *performance* of self-exploration is foregrounded, and the effect is a socially situated spectacle in which students “call out” (as Hughes and Purnell put it) to each other, and to a wider, unknown and unknowable audience who may be lurking beyond the footlights.

However, such openness must be accompanied by alternative approaches to ‘authenticity’, confession and disclosure. Convincingness in the spectacle is about mastery of form, not authenticity or revelation. The demonstration of competence, so essential to professional education in particular, might be undertaken differently than in the dominant personal-confessional (Bleakley, 1999) mode. Alternative modes of reflection might encompass both the production and analysis of imagery, film and hypertextual accounts of professional practice. Fictional and idealised (Hargreaves, 2004) (or perhaps deliberately catastrophic) narratives of practice could be produced and then critiqued by deconstructing categories of “good” and “bad” practice (Kamler & Thomson, 2006, pp.67-8). Creative analytical practices (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p.962), such as deliberately constructing the same account from a number of perspectives (Bolton, 2005, pp.56-7), might take the place of more literal ideas of reflection, while still giving teachers a way to interpret their students’ grasp of theoretical perspectives and practice issues.

Furthermore, through digital practices of tagging and aggregation, the production and gathering of fragments can generate a culture of reflection as placeholding – the creation of a resource that students can return to, not as a narrative of the past or an artefact of development, but a space of continual bricolage in the present.

The placeholder

I propose the placeholder as a taggable, searchable, reconfigurable fragment of content. The opposite of a narrative, the placeholder stands alone as an expression of a thought, idea or moment. It has value in itself as an aesthetic object, and it can also be combined and recombined with other placeholders to create a spectacle of reflection. It is not intended to tell a story of development, personal growth or change. The bricolage or remix process itself may sometimes tell such a story, however, as students choose from amongst the content in their reflective environment to produce a particular effect.

An important feature of a placeholder pedagogy is that placeholders should be created in spaces that are not highly structured, the way most e-portfolio environments are. A placeholder begins, always, with a blank page. This might mean that students choose to take photographs or create digital images, films, animations, wikis,

blog posts or audio files. It does not suggest that these activities can be conducted in a 'neutral' space, because all interfaces have ideological implications. However, the ability to experiment with form, content and meaning-making in multimodal digital space, and to pull these new forms together in various ways, makes for a more exploratory, creative experience than filling in blanks on a pre-designed template can be. Modern blogging environments are increasingly becoming the sorts of flexible spaces where multimodal accounts can be produced and worked with in this way.

Placeholders can furthermore be worked with through tagging. To explore this it is useful to compare the concept of a bookmark (one sort of placeholder in a literal sense) in digital and analogue space. A bookmark in a print book can be in just one place at a time, and its function is to store one piece of information: "return to this". It is a marker of past interest or a record of stoppage ("this is the place I've got to"). Many of us probably have books scattered around our homes or offices full of these bookmarks – flags, notes, scraps of paper, receipts, paperclips, folded corners. Each one is individual, disconnected from the rest, and has to be sought out and deliberately returned to before further connections emerge from it.

Digital bookmarks are different. They are stored as hypertext, and augmented with metadata: descriptions, notes and most importantly, tags. Tags are keywords that describe the content of the link being bookmarked. A single tag is emblematic of brevity, surface and speed. It can represent the content it tags in only a superficial way. However, taken together, and turned into hyperlinks, tags become an evolving and complex "gathering" (Edwards, 2010) of subject and object. Ewing (2010, online) has described "hashtags" (the form of hyperlinked tags used on Twitter, for example) as "secret doors", "time machines" and "collisions".

In an environment like Delicious (<http://www.delicious.com/>), I can click on any of my own tags and be taken to all the other links I have given the same tag to. The result of that click is a remix of my links. The remix has not been deliberately created by me, but it reflects something of my interests over time that might be relevant or interesting to me now. It might spark new ideas or connections. I can also, within the same system of tags, go beyond my own collection to see what others in the system have tagged using the same keyword. A collection of tags is sometimes called a "tag cloud". Within a cloud, clicking any of the tags leads to a page with all resources containing that tag, from all users within the system. These evolving folksonomies (user-generated taxonomies) can be markers of community and the social space of a course.

Tags are not really about completion or the past. Rather, they are agents of the present, insistently drawing the past out of itself and presenting it anew. They take us "from one place to another without traversing time" (Baudrillard, 1994, p.70). A collapse of time, or what Bayne (2010) calls "the problematising of the 'natural' relation between past and present", can contribute to an uncanny and posthumanist approach to learning which: "works with the idea of the learning process as volatile, disorienting and invigorating.... In defamiliarising the familiar through creative pedagogical appropriation of the digital, teaching becomes newly, and productively, strange" (p.10).

Here, as with the spectacle, access is privileged over context, which is another way of saying that context is continually re-presented, made part of the present moment. Each time I reuse a tag – knowingly or unknowingly – I am producing a link, a wormhole between my experiences and present and someone else's (which might be a past self). The tag is in this sense the ultimate reflective practice, as it makes the past newly generative each time it is used. Asking students to tag the content they create or curate in a digital space is therefore a method by which to encourage a different mode of reflection: one that is instantly accessible through time and context, and available for reuse or remixing.

Practices that foreground reconfigurability and remixability are central to digital culture (Deuze, 2006, p.66). As dominant 'vernacular' forms, these practices are inevitably making their way into formal education (Carpenter, 2009), but are also contested there, as they are seen as coming into conflict with core academic values of textual supremacy, individual authorship and originality. At the same time, some teachers and educational researchers are arguing that the remix represents a fruitful lens through which to consider creativity: "Regardless of context – be it literary text or commonplace book or audio performance – [remix] is identified as a means of invention and a source of creativity" (Yancey, 2009, p.6).

More creative and fragmented modes of representation would emphasise the malleability of experience, and could give students new ways of understanding the academic and professional identities they are (re)producing – it could make experience into "content for meddling with" (McWilliam, 2005, p.7). Remix shakes things up, and offers new perspectives, and it is here that its value for reflective practices may be most apparent.

In the EDC course, the lifestream is an example of a placeholder pedagogy. Though content in the lifestream appears in chronological order, the combination of sources that 'feed' into it create a fragmented spectacle rather than a coherent narrative. Each week, students review this spectacle and draw their own connections and conclusions about what the content from the week has 'revealed' to them about their learning. This practice, repeated for 12 weeks, merges into the stream, as the weekly reviews are incorporated into the lifestream itself. The end result is a machinic remix of the various online actions of each student, punctuated by sense-making exercises which – often playfully – attempt to impose order on the fragments of the week. A student on the EDC course explained at the end of the course why the lifestream was not of the past:

Comments I made, notes to myself at the beginning, are far enough from me now in time that I can look and be inspired anew, or reminded of things I thought I would do and have forgotten – or haven't started yet. This isn't the past, it's a guide for the future, for me anyway. (Boyd, 2010, online)

Digital reflection using a model of speed and fragmentation brings the past into the present, where it can be taken up and made anew.

Conclusion

High-stakes online reflection needs to be rethought, and we need to start by adopting more critical and creative approaches to subjectivity, addressivity and webness in reflective writing. The concepts of the spectacle and the placeholder point us towards new ways of thinking reflection differently.

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