Transmedial Projects, Scholarly Habitus, and Critical Know-How in a British University in China

Melissa S. Brown [1], Clifton Evers [2], David H. Fleming [1]
Filippo Gilardi [1], and James Reid [3]

[1] *The University of Nottingham Ningbo China*
[2] *Newcastle University, UK*
[3] *Akita International University (Japan)*

filippo.gilardi@nottingham.edu.cn
melissa.brown@nottingham.edu.cn
clifton.evers@ncl.ac.uk
david.fleming@nottingham.edu.cn
rjames@aiu.ac.jp

ABSTRACT – 'Transmedial' education programs are still in their infancy, and what conceptual shifts they require to function and whether they aid in learning and teaching continues to be up for debate. This article evaluates employing a 'transmedial project' assessment and incorporating 'transmedia pedagogies' to assist students to become creators of knowledge within the cultural milieu of a British University situated in Mainland China. The 'Transmedial Projects' are inspired by Transmedia Storytelling, which media scholar Henry Jenkins defines as "the unfolding of stories across multiple media platforms, with each medium making distinctive contributions to our understanding of the world" (2006, 293). This article primarily interrogates group discussions among teaching staff, which draw on participant observation notes (gathered between 2014 - 2016). Student Evaluation of Modules (SEM) and Student Evaluation of Teaching (SET) commentary also inform the discussion, as do two focus groups with students. We will also discuss the culturally-specific 'scholarly habitus' and move towards 'critical know-how' which were the conceptual starting points that inform the transmedial approach which we employed. We subsequently explore a number of issues and benefits which we felt arose from our implementation of this transmedial approach. For example, while some students 'reverse-engineered' projects to fit taught theories and perpetuate a tradition of teacher-led training, there was also the emergence of more autonomous learning accomplished by 'thinking through making'.

1. INTRODUCTION

Though research on transmedia-related educational programs is still in its infancy, McCarthy et al. (2013) and Johnson et al. (2016) have found a variety of positive impacts when the audience actively engages with the creation of a unified learning experience, as well as an integrating of knowledge and skills. Transmedia-related educational programs are inspired by Transmedia Storytelling, which media scholar Henry Jenkins defines as "the unfolding of stories across multiple media platforms, with each medium making distinctive contributions to our understanding of the world" (2006, 293). Preferably, this occurs with audience collaboration.

This article explores conceptual discussions by and experiences of a group of higher education teachers who employed a transmedial assessment (transmedial projects) and blended learning to assist students to become participants in and creators of knowledge in the context of a British University situated in Mainland China. The transmedial projects are part of a first year undergraduate theoretical module entitled "Communication and Technology." They are creative in nature, requiring students to create projects based upon key concepts, using media forms such as audio mash-ups, short films, computer games, posters, sculptures, board-games, paintings, models, or any other interactive objects. The key aim of the projects and their accompanying portfolio was to encourage students to "think through making" and so better actualise and demonstrate their understanding of key concepts. In this article we deliberate on the employment of the transmedial projects as a way to shift the culturally-specific "scholarly habitus" we were faced with in this setting and how developing "critical know-how" was helpful. We base our reflections on group discussions among the staff which drew on participant observation notes we kept (of which there were five staff members over the two-year period: 2014 to 2016) as well as data from two focus groups with students.

The "Communication and Technology" module was designed to introduce students to a 'critical' approach to their inter-actions, complicities, and mutual dependencies upon material and abstract technologies. This was done through introducing students to the work of cultural and critical theorists (such as Deleuze and Guattari, Foucault, Haraway and others), and key concepts (such as Assemblage, Discipline Societies, Companion Species). As a first-year module, the cohorts of students at this uniquely-situated university campus have often found it particularly challenging.

Each year the cohort has numbered around 200 students, the majority being mainland Chinese, with a small percentage being international students [1]. Most of the Chinese students struggle to adjust from their more familiar formal education system to teaching and learning in a British HE institution situated in mainland China, with all the socio-cultural and language adaptation and displacements (all instruction is carried out in English) this presents. Alongside this attendant culture-shock, this module is conceptually demanding – even for native English speakers.

Originally, this module was assessed through an essay and an exam (incorporating a short essay format). The majority of students struggled, and there were widespread third class passes, soft fails, hard fails, and a high rate of plagiarism. In response to this, staff decided to explore using a transmedial pedagogy to improve student understanding and learning, as well as to enhance criticality. There is also an ethical imperative to what we are attempting to achieve. As Christopher Coney (2015, 523) argues, criticality is "essential to living a flourishing life". The first step, however, was to come to grips with the predominant 'scholarly habitus' we were working with.

2. SCHOLARLY HABITUS

Megan Watkins (2005) explains that "scholarly habitus" refers to pedagogical and learning dispositions, trained abilities, and structured predilections that come to guide and orientate doing, thinking, and feeling in the classroom. Watkins builds on the work of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu who writes, "The habitus – embodied history, internalized as second nature and so forgotten as history – is the active presence of the whole past of which it is the product" (1990, 56). A regular collaborator with Bourdieu, Loïc Wacquant explains habitus as "the way society becomes deposited in persons" (2004, 316). Habitus is affected by mimicry, observation, "education, cultural memory, upbringing, and social circumstance" (Sterne 2006, 91).

---

[1] In this context, 'International Students' refers to non-mainland Chinese, these students tend to come from a diverse variety of countries, including the UK, Russia, Faroe Islands, United States, Malaysia, and others; in effect this means that even among the International Students, not all are studying in their first language, but it is only among the International Students that there are native English-speakers.

There is pre-disposition but there is also a "feel for the game" that involves non-conscious improvisation (*Ibid*). Wacquant later clarifies that the concept of "habitus" is not fixed and "social agents are motile, sensuous, and suffering creatures" (2014, 10). In enquiring about our students' scholarly habitus, we are exploring the social preconceptions and educational habits that they enter into the course with.

There is a significant body of research around Chinese learners and pedagogy, and alongside this there has arisen generalisations and stereotypes about the Chinese scholarly habitus. The perception can be that it equates to being passive, compliant, hard-working, and obedient. Chinese students are described as not voicing their opinions or dissent in class, not joining in activities, not asking questions or giving responses, not wanting to come to the fore as individuals, wanting to maintain harmony, focusing on group goals, as well as relying "on teachers to impart knowledge" and determine how well they have learned (or not) because their pedagogy is claimed to be didactic and teacher-led rather than student-focused (Subramaniam 2008, 11). It has been argued that students tend to memorize content for an examination-based system of assessment and progression in China, meaning they become "surface learners" rather than aiming for deep understanding (Pearson and Beasley 1996, 83). Students may unwittingly plagiarise as they come to terms with an author's work through repetition, and may find it difficult to be critical of the author, express their own opinions in a non-native language, and generally articulate ideas in their own words if they feel like they cannot "improve" on the original and so "borrow" as textual ownership is constructed in a culturally different way (Pennycook 1996) [2].

However in contrast to some of this, John Biggs (1998) expresses concerns about over-generalising and a reliance on stereotypes about Confucian-heritage pedagogy and learning. He argues that that memorisation in the Chinese educational context is not simply meant to be 'mechanical' or regurgitation of content. Rather repetition is used to aid understanding. While there is mechanical rote-memorisation for certain tasks (e.g. language-learning) there will also be memorisation of concepts so as to recall them, as well as how and when to apply them, the results of which is

---

[2] Pennycook does not argue it is OK to plagiarise but that teachers have to be reflexive about why copying occurs, which includes laziness, lack of academic training but also cultural formations of textual ownership.

thoughtfully considered. Biggs's (1998) argument refers to a 1992 study by Stigler and Stevenson which argued that Chinese pedagogy was not teacher-centered but actually student-centered with teachers seeing their "task as posing provocative questions, allowing reflective wait time, varying techniques to suit individual students, carefully designing coherent lessons, and using error reflectively" (*Ibid*, 727). Stigler and Stevenson identified constructivism as the most common teaching approach. The study by Biggs found that while there is a hierarchy whereby the teacher is to be respected, there was also shared problem-solving and discussion.

Thi Tuyet Tran (2012) points out that quietness in class can be due to lack of English proficiency or because the students are reflecting, rather than the students taking on a 'passive' role. Processing material in a non-native language with a very different cultural context takes times. According to Tran (2012, 64), there is also a different "appropriateness of behaviours and reactions in the classroom environment". For example, in China student participation is informed by negotiating face (*mianzi*) (e.g. it would be inappropriate to make the teacher or others lose face) [3]. There can be a fear about expressing oneself as well the extra time it takes to articulate oneself in a non-native language and cultural setting. The language-barriers facing both teachers and students makes engaging with concepts and readings more complex because it may not only accentuate the perceived difficulty of the material, but also the students' desire to be 'told what it means' when they lack confidence in their own readings and interpretations.

Many would argue that Chinese students' scholarly habitus is informed by a pedagogy deeply rooted in Confucianism which is embodied as shared tastes, orientations, values, and practices. Confucianism is a cultural force highly valued in Chinese society (Li 2016). While Buddhism and Taoism also play powerful cultural roles in China, it is argued that Confucianism most informs the modern formal Chinese education system (*Ibid*). However, some scholars ague that the Confucian heritage of educational thinking actually advocates self-cultivation and person-making, which involves nurturing and reflecting upon what is or might be the ideal person – *Junzi* (Zhao and Deng 2016, 2). This "self-cultivation is the precondition for cultivating the critical and creative potential of the individual and en-

---

[3] Mianzi is a «strategy that protects self-respect and individual identity. Face saving activities are the rites that protect the individual's role in the guanxi network, preserving individual identity and social status» (Ting-Toomey 1988: 215).

International Journal of Transmedia Literacy - 3 - December 2017
http: //www.ledonline.it/transmedialiteracy – Online ISSN 2465-2261 - Print ISSN 2465-227X

49

abling him or her to fulfil social responsibilities and functions" (*Ibid*). It has also recently been argued that the modern Chinese educational system is instrumentalist and over-emphasises rote-memorisation for an examination-based system, and is actually at odds with Confucian-heritage pedagogy (Wu 2016). That is, there is a tendency to reward a scholarly habitus not orientated toward creative, independent, and critical thinking for self-cultivation (Wu 2016). The modern Chinese education system has actually increased the emphasis on transference of reified technical-instrumental knowledge primarily for the purposes of fulfilling job expectations and practical theoretical training so citizens fit a particular social, economic, and political order (*Ibid*). There has been a promotion of 'citizen-making' rather than self-cultivation (Law 2016). This has also lead to debate within China about how schools and universities have become 'business-like', and participation is now principally about social mobility and financial gain at the expense of self-cultivation (Zhang and Dao 2016). It has been argued that the contemporary Chinese education system and methods are failing "to help Chinese students to develop creativity and critical thinking skills" (*Ibid*, 2).

Keeping this scholarly research in mind, our own experiences of teaching mainland Chinese students has shown that some have difficulties making the transition to a British HE context, particularly and the creativity and criticality promoted (in principle) in this setting. This has to do with language barriers but also arriving from the modern Chinese educational model, in particular its focus on exam assessment leading to students who are inexperienced in other forms of assessment, and their more usual practice of using memorization as a route to learning proving to be relatively ineffective when it comes to more abstract or conceptual material where there is not 'one definition'.

3. FROM CRITICAL THINKING TO 'CRITICAL KNOW-HOW'

We understand critical thinking as being distinct from the three other broad forms of thinking generally taught and practiced within the modern university. Coney (2015) instructs that the latter is constituted by the practical (*qua* communication, language) (520), technical-instrumental (*qua* professional skills) (518-19), contemplative (*qua* timeless, theoretical approaches) (516). Critical thinking offers an altogether different, possibly disruptive, manner of engaging with the world. We align critical thinking

with being an "event of thought" (MacKenzie and Porter 2011, 65ff). An "event of thought" is how critical thinking does not constitute an act that is purely intellectual or abstract, but that which also has wider material-embodied and socio-political ramifications.

In this we hoped to conceptually integrate the material we were teaching (i.e. Deleuze, Foucault etc.) into our pedagogy for this module. What we hoped the transmedial projects would present us with were mediated heterogeneous conditions of possibility – human and non-human, abstract and material – that can contingently come together and enter into affective relationships whereby the vitality yields articulations (again: human and non-human, abstract and material). What this event of thought and mediation yields is not "predetermined with any certainty," stable, or "well-demarcated" (Vogl 2012, 628). While there can be congealing, inertia, and standardisation there is always potential, including the actualising of new unexpected possibilities. In *The Logic of Sense*, philosopher Gilles Deleuze describes the 'singularity' as the epitome of the event. He writes: "Singularities are turning points and points of inflection; bottlenecks, knots, foyers, and centers; points of fusion, condensation, and boiling; points of tears and joy, sickness and health, hope and anxiety, 'sensitive' points". (1990, 52). There is an emphasis on open-endedness and process that informed our mobilising of transmedial projects to help students move beyond a tendency of being instrumental users of media and knowledge, towards also registering that they are active, critical, and creative catalysts of media and knowledge.

This relationality also sits well with media theory stemming from the work of Marshall McLuhan (1964) which argues that media is bound up with how we pay attention, how and what we read, see, feel, hear, perceive, move, learn, and know. However, we are also cognisant of the autonomous and agential material-technical-instrumental infrastructure, which includes machines and information systems (Kittler 1999) of which this is a part. As Jeremy Packer and Stephen Wiley (2011) argue that 'communication matters' and the materiality whether it is physiological, mechanical, or digital is vibrant and also has agency. That is, the students can be shown that they are embedded in post-human "RhizomANTic" networks and are participating in "cyborg pedagogies" (Gough 2004).

Given the material agencies and expanded sense of self being invoked here we shifted from the concept of 'critical thinking' – given the Cartesian baggage the word "thinking" carries despite Coney's (2015) re-articulation

– to "critical know-how". Glen Fuller (2013) (following the work of Gilles Deleuze) explains how "know-how" can be understood as an affective assemblage [*agencement*] of skills, techniques, thought, and socio-technical components that circulate particular conditions of possibility. Critical know-how does not simply involve knowing a series of how-to steps but is a thinking through making involving not only already established but emergent skills, knowledge, understanding while being part of assemblages that involve challenges and ongoing modifications as contingencies play out. There is experimenting, constructing, and creating because even if a challenge requires drawing upon existing skills, knowledge, and understanding it will always be in a new arrangement with different outcomes (Fuller 2013). Any 'how to' instantiation is not simply one of relaying "technical information *per se* or accumulating experience. It is, rather, a process of iterations that are 'primers of experience' through which one can in future 'encounter new challenges'" (*Ibid*, 277).

The critical know-how approach challenges attitudes students expressed to staff that critical thinking is too abstract and has no real-world 'use value' for them. We suggest a conceptual starting point of critical know-how helps students and ourselves to recognise a porous sense of self "in open dialogue with the world we inhabit" (Stoltz 2015, 485). Paul Carter in *Material Thinking* explains that such "creative research is related to the goal of material thinking, and both look beyond the making process to the local reinvention of social relations" (2004, 10). What this evokes for us is an "affective pedagogy" which accommodates learning beyond the cognitive (Hickey-Moody 2016). Deleuze writes that affectus involves "an increase or decrease of the power of acting, for the body and mind alike" (1988, 47). The world is grasped and experienced marked out through the relational connection with the world (Stoltz 2015). Meaning-making is embodied (Wetherell 2012, 4). Our turn to critical know-how is intended to disturb the students' embedded scholarly habitus, while acknowledging both that habitus is stubborn and also some of the values in the students' previous academic experiences. Further, there are demands in higher education which attempt to contain transformation and explicitly reproduce, discipline, and duplicate certain propensities and with them the social orderings which inform them, for example, the aforementioned pedagogy of "citizen-making" which can also underpin aspects of the British HE context.

4. DOING THE TRANSMEDIAL PROJECTS

In order to implement the new assessments, students were introduced to the transmedial projects and what they might be from the first week of teaching. They are asked to build their projects over eleven teaching weeks in groups of four-five, with each group being required to submit three projects in total out of a list of 9 possible topics. These projects are based upon a concept drawn from each week's lecture, with each needing to be presented in a different medium (photography, short film, PowerPoint, audio recording, interactive objects, presentations, games). The themes explored were drawn from the lectures, readings, and seminars; they included broad concepts such as "Embodiment", "Visuality", "Play", "Transmediality", and "Posthuman", but also invited engagement with concepts drawn from specific theorists, such as "Discipline Society", "the Panopticon", and "Heterotopias" (Michel Foucault), "Assemblage", and "Control Society" (Deleuze and Guattari), "Biopolitics" and the "Anthropological Machine" (Giorgio Agamben), "Cyborgs" and "Humanimal" (Donna Haraway).

Projects need to be accompanied by a portfolio, which includes a record of their creative process, reflections, exploration of course material, and bibliographic references. Students were presented with a wide range of media 'texts' to engage with, from academic articles, to short fiction, photographs, film, online games, images of sculptures or interactive pieces, which are not only aimed at providing 'examples' which might inspire their projects, but which can also constitute transmedial forms of encountering the same conceptual material. The goal here is for such transmediality to offer complementary 'texts' which will help students engage with abstract concepts from multiple perspectives, in effect offering them multiple 'access points' to enter into an academic debate, and encourage their own creativity. In seminars students were given feedback from tutors to help them develop their work and encourage them to develop time-management and collaborative skills. As well as seminars and office hours, an online forum was set up so peers and staff can address student questions and offer further material, such as practical advice/tutorials (how to make collages and how to use software programs such as GameMaker). This example of blended learning was intended to encourage students to engage with course material both in class and in their own time, offering another 'access point' into the concepts and themes.
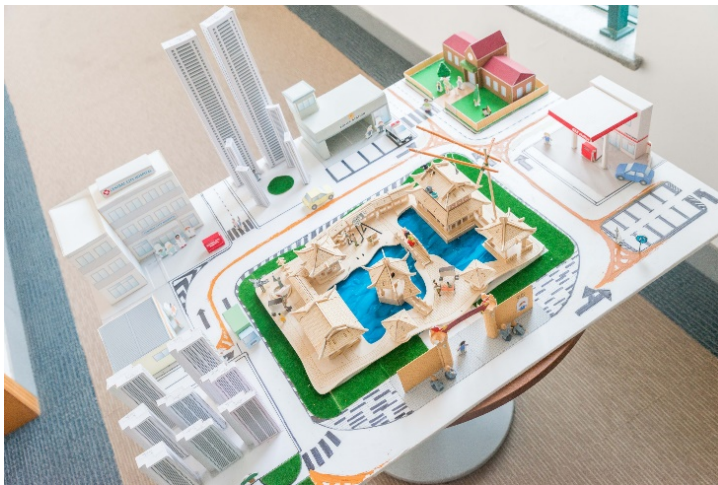
Figure 1: 'Heterotopia'

Figure 2: 'Heterotopia in a Discipline Society'

International Journal of Transmedia Literacy - 3 - December 2017
http: //www.ledonline.it/transmedialiteracy – Online ISSN 2465-2261 - Print ISSN 2465-227X

54

Figure 3: 'Embodied Assemblage'

Figure 4: 'Affective Assemblage Hologram'

International Journal of Transmedia Literacy - 3 - December 2017
http: //www.ledonline.it/transmmedialiteracy – Online ISSN 2465-2261 - Print ISSN 2465-227X

55

Informing the practicalities of this model is our understanding that students can be active participants in internet-based participatory cultures (Gilardi and Reid 2011), whereby they are already informally undertaking critical know-how. Participatory cultures can be categorised as: "Affiliations" such as message boards, metagaming and Facebook; "Expressions" such as fan fiction and video making, and digital sampling; "Collaborative Problem Solving" such as Wikipedia and alternative reality gaming; and "Circulations" such as blogging and podcasting (Jenkins et al. 2009, 3). Observing how socially connected students are on their devices drew our attention to how 'blended learning' could also be used to arrive as an active learning procedure to motivate learners, helping them remember important information and develop collaborative and technological competencies (Friedman, Rodriguez and McComb 2001). 'Blended Learning' refers to how pedagogy and learning takes place with digital and online media technologies wherein students can play with the learning experience, and dictate how quickly or slowly their learning progresses, what will or will not be part of the learning experience, as well as where this will all take place. For example, transmedia products that lend themselves to digitisation can be placed on virtual learning environments (such as a module webpage) along with instructor comments and the grading rubrics, to allow other learners to critically evaluate the products and gain inspiration for their own work.
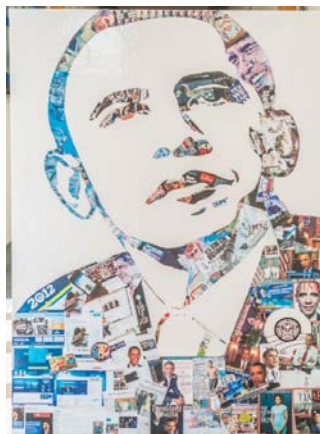

Figure 5. 'Transmedia Persona'

International Journal of Transmedia Literacy - 3 - December 2017
http: //www.ledonline.it/transmedialiteracy – Online ISSN 2465-2261 - Print ISSN 2465-227X

56

Figure 6. 'Communication as Movement' (flipbook with music box)

Figure 6a. 'Discipline Society – You are Being Watched'

Figure 6b. 'Discipline Society – You are Being Watched'

International Journal of Transmedia Literacy - 3 - December 2017
http: //www.ledonline.it/transmedialiteracy – Online ISSN 2465-2261 - Print ISSN 2465-227X

57

Figure 6c. 'Discipline Society – You are Being Watched'

In embracing a transmedial model on this course, it aimed to develop the students' critical know-how in ways that did not exclude any learning styles or students' particular skills. The staff aimed to accommodate the kinds of learners described in constructivism: the active learner who discusses, debates and hypothesises about content; the social learner who co-constructs knowledge through dialogue; and the creative learner who creates or recreates knowledge for themselves (Meyer and Land 2013, 34). A reading of Howard Gardner' theory of "Multiple Intelligences" (1993, 1999) led us to consider the depths of creativity and expression not being explored in the traditional classroom setting. We considered how diverse activities could be woven into the curriculum that employ learners' differing intelligence profiles (Reid, Hirata and Gilardi 2011). For example, group-work and creative projects can foster peer learning and non-language constrained forms of expression. However, the course retains an individual essay assessment, ensuring that students were still required to express themselves and demonstrate the ability to individually conduct research and apply concepts. Each student's final mark was determined on the average between their group mark and their individual essay. Evangeline Harris-Stefanakis (2010) argues that "differentiating assessment" caters to the various learning styles of students, allowing them to demonstrate their understanding and knowledge beyond forms of assessment which over-emphasise one skill e.g. language ability (memorisation). She goes on to suggest that, "portfolios, in particular, capture both the process and products of students' learning and reflects their multiple languages, multiple intelligences, and multiple abilities" (*Ibid*, 10). Rolheiser, Bower, and Stevahn (2000) argue that portfolios require

International Journal of Transmedia Literacy - 3 - December 2017
http: //www.ledonline.it/transmedialiteracy – Online ISSN 2465-2261 - Print ISSN 2465-227X

58

students to practice reflexivity, and document it, by requiring them to develop metacognition (that is, to think about their thinking), self-evaluate their work and progress, develop critical thinking through problem-solving. They also allow teachers a more in-depth understanding of the students themselves, not only their work (*Ibid*, 31-32).

5. ISSUES

With the introduction of this new approach to assessment in this module, a number of issues emerged, resulting in our needing to re-evaluate our presumptions. These included our presumptions about the students' digital literacies, as well as how well group work (and marks) would be embraced by students who tended to define themselves as being from a more collectivist culture. By extension, there was a need to modify the transmedial assessment and how it would be undertaken in subsequent years.

The first issue that staff had to reflect on was presumptions regarding students' use of digital media, and their digital literacies. Students focused only on digital media which they were already familiar with (e.g. smart phones), they rarely engaged with the opportunities to gain new digital media literacies and subsequent challenges. For example, among the software available for projects is the option to use GameMaker or Interlude (a free online application, which is demonstrated in seminars and via online tutorials). Of a cohort of nearly 200 students over two years, only one group ever used GameMaker, and none used Interlude. There was, however, extensive use of digital photography and video taken with smart phones, illustrating the preference for familiarity.

The students' familiarity with using certain digital media tended to correlate to a lack of longer-term planning or reflective use of the medium. This became evident in the reflexivity (or lack thereof) in the portfolios, which demonstrated the time and effort which went into the projects, and the amount of thought put into exploring the course concepts. In effect, the ease with which photos and videos could be made via smart phones, as well as the ease of cutting-and-pasting images or other material from the internet, enabled a significant amount of 'last minute work'. In the 'worst' cases this amounted to groups that had found images or short videos online which, without altering, they then 'reverse engineered' into projects by explaining them as being symbolic of course concepts. We suggest that this is

International Journal of Transmedia Literacy - 3 - December 2017
http: //www.ledonline.it/transmedialiteracy – Online ISSN 2465-2261 - Print ISSN 2465-227X

59

evidence of laziness, or attempts to be strategic, rather than due to any cross-cultural barrier or a product of any particular educational system.

While we are aware that group work is often promoted as a valuable pedagogical exercise encouraging active learning it did not always go smoothly. There was student resentment at some students not 'pulling their weight' and 'freeloading'. In some groups, it was evident that the three projects had been distributed among the group, rather than each being something that the entire group had worked on, so that a couple, or even only one person, was responsible for a particular project. This resulted in there being noticeably different qualities in projects from the same group, even having the striking difference of one project being First Class, and another falling in the Fail category. The tendency to approach the holistic assignment by dividing the projects among individuals in the group, rather than for the whole group to be involved in all projects, appeared to be fairly common. This illustrated a preference to work on projects in pairs or individually. We surmise this may have been a means of reducing the workload, that is, each person actually only needing to work on one project, rather than contributing to three. We felt that such groups were not truly functioning as 'groups', but rather as smaller units who worked separately, but submitting their work together. The groups that actively worked together across all three projects produced over-all stronger results evidencing for us the pedagogical value of what we had intended the group work to be like.

In the classrooms, we found that there was a continuing expectation for teacher-led learning. However, the ongoing project work undertaken in groups did partially help to alleviate this. It also helped to alleviate some of the quietness as students communicated with each other in their native language as they worked on projects. The students proved to be predominantly autonomous learners, evidenced by their engagement with each other in class, although not via the online forum. There was very little engagement with the online forums, which in the end largely constituted staff members responding to each other, and hoping that even being able to read over such discussions might be helpful for students even if they did not themselves directly engage. The staff were informed by students that they preferred using their own online platforms (usually *Wēixìn* groups – a popular social media platform in China), instead of engaging with those provided by the university. We felt that a significant contributing factor to this was language – the students discussions on these platforms was predominantly in Chinese whereas the material we were posting in the forum

International Journal of Transmedia Literacy - 3 - December 2017
http: //www.ledonline.it/transmedialiteracy – Online ISSN 2465-2261 - Print ISSN 2465-227X

60

was in English. While the autonomously organised digital social networks promoted discussion among the students, and thus potentially offered a space for further engagement with the course, it did not equate to dialogue involving the teachers, or even all students on the course, reducing the possibility for collaborative learning that might have included the entire cohort. This also lead to misunderstandings being disseminated, as well as the incorrect definition of terms and concepts being depended upon; many of these incorrect definitions being drawn from online dictionaries which provided colloquial, but not academic, explanations of key concepts and terms via translations into Chinese (particularly at issue for terms which have general usage, like 'assemblage', or 'discipline'). This is evidence of the difficulty of studying in a non-native language and cultural setting, and the Transmedial Project online forums provided by staff did not overcome this. This also highlighted the extent to which the students' online forums functioned less as a means of autonomously 'expanding' what was being learned 'in class', but as an attempt to 'simplify', sometimes to the extent that information was distorted. A further side-effect of these informal online forums was that many of them were not inclusive of the entire cohort since they were extensively taking place in Chinese thereby working to distance non-Chinese international students from these discussions.

A number of suggestions can be made to mitigate some of the issues. Online forum postings could be made a compulsory part of the portfolio so that teaching staff and non-Chinese students are not excluded, for example. Student evaluation of previous cohort's work could be used to highlight that quick-fix digital solutions will not translate into higher grades, and that the process as a whole and not just the final product is being evaluated. This would also provide students with a greater understanding of the assessment rubric and provide motivation and creative inspiration for their own projects. To reduce the perception of unfairness induced by the suspicion, if not the incidence, of social loafing, peer and self-evaluation of group members' contributions could be introduced. These evaluations could also consider the extent to which the group functioned as a group rather than as individual contributions assembled post hoc. Finally, the fact that students tended toward using familiar digital solutions rather than learn new ones, despite receiving tutorials on how to do so, could be addressed through similarly tweaking course requirements to make certain solutions compulsory.

6. BENEFITS

Students at this institution have sometimes demonstrated a tendency to plagiarise and 'borrow' (both knowing and unwittingly) work in essays and rote-memorise content for exams. When the exam was eliminated rote-memorisation became a defunct tactic. There was significantly less plagiarism evident in the essays attached to the transmedial project, and it was felt by the staff that the critical know-how encouraged through the creative group projects translated into more original essay writing. In effect, the group based creative projects gave the students more confidence in their own understanding of concepts, and more confidence in using their words. As one external module moderator commented: "The project also requires students to deconstruct their work in various phases, including understanding of concepts, rationale, engagement with reading and creative process. That is very useful for their learning process."

The teaching staff found that those projects which required more group organisation, and longer time-scales for completion (e.g. often those that were analogue) fostered more sustained thought and engagement with the course concepts and also more collaborative learning. Group members working together allowed know-how to happen more freely and come together in a unique manner to meet the localised challenge. Group organisational skills and longer-term planning was clear in many of the analogue projects (which included scale-models of parks, interactive objects, and flip-books), but only in a handful of digital projects. Some digital projects where students were more experimental emulated the productiveness of the analogue projects, but most digital projects suffered from the aforementioned familiarity and convenience which diminished the complexity of the challenges faced.

In the focus groups students stated that they enjoyed the opportunity to engage with creative projects and to 'make' something other than an essay. It was also found that though some students found the requirement to creatively engage challenging, they also found a connection between 'being creative' and 'learning the concepts'. A student in one focus group said, "I enjoyed being creative. You have to think harder how to represent abstract ideas. It's almost as if you have to explain it to yourself." They also added that it "helped us to find more of the [academic] ideas in our real lives", an observation which grounded the use of creative projects in fostering self-reflexivity and criticality.

As noted by Murphy (1997), the process of collective marking and engaging in collective discussion allowed for the teaching staff to become 'reflective practitioners' by allowing for further exploration and adaptation of our pedagogical practices in implementing this course. The collective marking and discussion of student portfolios allowed for teachers to practice self-reflection through dialogue, reflecting upon the basis of their evaluations of students' work, as well as the efficacy of their teaching, thus enabling them to become "a community of what Schon has called 'reflective practitioners'" (*Ibid*, 76-77). Also called "reflective conversation", such dialogue through critical discussion of students' work gives teachers an opportunity to critically engage with their teaching, evaluating their own practices, not only assessing students (*Ibid*, 77). The exercise of discussing and agreeing on grades was useful to identify issues we did not initially consider. One of the biggest issues we faced was the difficulty in marking the different projects in line with the different criteria we had initially decided on (11 different criteria), and the different interpretation of these by the different markers. While the team marking process was designed to counteract these problems and calibrate the marking criteria, we felt the need to devise specific benchmark descriptors to help with marking creative and critical projects.

The cohorts that undertook the transmedia project achieved higher marks than the year that did not. There were some impressive and outstanding projects, with more first class grades being awarded. Connected to this, there were also more first class essay grades awarded in 2015-2016 than in all the previous runs of this course. This was indicative of a general shift upwards in the student grades for this module, with the average grade for the projects coming in at around 56, and the average mark for the essay working out at around 52 (equivalent to the other first year module run during this term). This combines to form an average of 54 (a slight rise on 2014-2015's average of 53 (50 for the essays and 55 for the projects) and more significantly with regards to the pre-project year's average of 50.5 (50 for essays and 51 for the now defunct exam). During the 2015-2016 run the essay question was also revised so that the work and thinking conducted on the projects could feed-forward and improve the writing of the essays. Here students were asked to pick and choose different concepts learned over the eleven weeks and use these to write an original essay on a technology or practice of their choice. Overall there were some original and insightful essays that earned high grades, with the more derivative and descriptive

ones being judged to warrant lower grade passes (3% first class essays, 20% 2i, 34% 2ii, 31% 3 class, 9% fail, 3% no submission).

7. CONCLUSION

Implementing a transmedial approach in this context was found to be both possible and productive. It is in itself an event of thought, an instantiation of critical know-how. For us it led to a critical reappraisal of conceptual starting points, enabling a collaborative pedagogical activity to emerge that has the potential to shift the scholarly habitus of all involved (teachers and students), though might not guarantee it. Such over-arching goals and claims undermine the very premise of creativity and openness we attempt to trigger. While issues did emerge (e.g. reliance on familiarity, teacher-led learning, and the dissemination of misinformation via informal online learning) like McCarthy et al. (2013) and Johnson et al. (2016) we found there to be a number of benefits attached to implementing the new assessment and teaching practices, particularly when analogue projects were pursued. Many analogue projects evidenced experimentation, complexity, cooperation, self-reflexivity, relevance of conceptual material, and provoked further reflection by the teachers, as well as contributing to increased student grades overall. Students that completed this module told new students that it had shown them how to work in way they returned to throughout the rest of their degree. This is the "priming for experience" Fuller (2013) presents as central to critical know-how. The transmedial approach addressed students' desire for a more practical and creative route into understanding theory. One would hope that this would extend beyond their academic careers, as the competencies and transferable social and learning skills developed through being part of these assemblages are likely to be needed on the workplace. The abilities to creatively problem-solve, pool knowledge, and collaborate to accomplish shared goals are seen as vital in most modern professional work places (Gilardi and Reid 2011), while the development of analytical tools with which to question social structures is not without potential importance. Since the students' portfolios and projects evidenced a deeper and more creative learning process the staff were able to witness these students becoming positive examples of autonomous learning and engagement – a shift in scholarly habitus in the making, for some.

REFERENCES

Biggs, John. 1998. "Learning from the Confucian Heritage: so Size doesn't Matter?" *International Journal of Education Research* 29(8). doi: 10.1016/S0883-0355(98)00060-3.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1990. *The Logic of Practice*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Carter, Paul. 2004. *Material Thinking: The Theory and Practice of Creative Research*. Carlton: Melbourne University Publishing.

Coney, Christopher L. 2015. "Critical Thinking in its Contexts and in Itself". *Education Philosophy and Theory* 47(5): 515-528. doi: 10.1080/ 00131857. 2014.883963.

Deleuze, Gilles. 1988. *Bergsonism*. Translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam. New York: Zone Books.

Deleuze, Gilles. 1990. *The Logic of Sense*. Translated by Mark Lester. New York: Columbia University Press.

Friedman, Paul, Fred Rodriguez and Joe McComb. 2001. "Why Students Do and Do Not Attend Classes: Myths and Realities". *College Teaching* 49(4): 124-33. doi: 10.1080/87567555.2001.10844593.

Fuller, Glen. 2013. "Towards an Archaeology of 'Know-how'". *Cultural Studies Review* 7(8): 271-295. doi: 10.5130/csr.v19i1.2710.

Gardner, Howard. 1993. *Multiple Intelligences: The Theory in Practice*. New York: Basic Books.

Gardner, Howard. 1999. *Intelligence Reframed: Multiple Intelligences for the 21st Century*. New York: Basic Books.

Gilardi, Filippo and James Reid. 2011. "E-learning through Transmedia Storytelling. How the Emerging Internet-Based Participatory Cultures in China can be Co-Opted for Education". In *Proceedings of Global Learn Asia Pacific 2011*. Melbourne: AACE, 1469-1474.

Gough, Noel. 2004. "RhizomANTically Becoming-cyborg: Performing Post-human Pedagogies". *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 36(3), 253-265. doi: 10.1111/j.1469-5812.2004.00066.x.

Harris-Stefanakis, Evengeline. 2010. *Differentiated Assessment: How to Assess the Learning Potential of Every Student*. San Fancisco: Jossey-Bass.

Hickey-Moody, Anna, Helen Palmer, and Esther Sayers. 2016. "Diffractive Pedagogies: Dancing Across New Materialist Imaginaries". *Gender and Education* 28(2): 213-229. doi: 10.1080/09540253.2016.1140723.

Jenkins, Henry. 2006. *Convergence Culture*. New York: New York University Press.

International Journal of Transmedia Literacy - 3 - December 2017
http: //www.ledonline.it/transmedialiteracy – Online ISSN 2465-2261 - Print ISSN 2465-227X

65

Jenkins, Henry, Ravi Purushotma, Margaret Weigel, Katie Clinton and Alice J. Robison. 2009. *Confronting the challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century*. Massachusset: MIT Press. https://mitpress. mit.edu/sites/default/files/titles/free_download/9780262513623_Confronting_the_Challenges.pdf.

Johnson, Pamela, Devon Steven, Barbara E. Lovitts, David Lowenstein and Jennifer Rodriguez. 2016. "Leveraging Transmedia Content to Reach and Support Underserved Children". *Journal of Children and Media* 10(2), 267-275. doi: 10.1080/17482798.2016.1140490.

Kittler, Friedrich A. 1999. *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*. Translated by Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Law, Wing W. 2016. "Cultivating Chinese Citizens: China's Search for Modernization and National Rejuvenation". In *Re-invisioning Chinese Education: The Meaning of Person-making in a New Age*, edited by Guoping Zhao and Zongyi Deng. Abingdon: Routledge, 34-55.

Li, Jin. 2016. "Rediscover Lasting Values: Confucian Cultural Learning Models in the Twenty-first Century". In *Re-invisioning Chinese Education: The Meaning of Person-making in a New Age*, edited by Guoping Zhao and Zongyi Deng. Abingdon: Routledge, 130-147.

McCarthy, Betsy, Linlin Li, Michelle Tiu, and Atienza Sara. 2013. "PBS Kids Mathematics Transmedia Suites in Preschool Homes". *Proceedings of the 12th International Conference on Interaction Design and Children* 128-136. doi: 10.1145/2485760.2485777.

MacKenzie, Iaín, and Robert Porter. 2011. *Dramatizing the Political: Deleuze and Guattari*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

McLuhan, Marshall. 1964. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Meyer, Jan and Ray Land. 2013. *Overcoming Barriers to Student Understanding: Threshold Concepts and Troublesome Knowledge*. London: Routledge.

Murphy, Sandra. 1997. "Teachers and Students: Reclaiming Assessment via Portfolios". In *Situating portfolios: Four perspectives*, edited by Kathleen B. Yancey and Irwin Weiser. Logan: Utah State University Press, 72-88.

Packer, Jeremy, and Stephen B. Crofts Wiley, eds. 2011. *Communication Matters: Materialist Approaches to Media, Mobility and Networks*. Routledge: London.

Pearson, Cecil L. and Colin J. Beasley. 1996. "Reducing Learning Barriers Amongst International Students: A Longitudinal Development Study". *The Australian Educational Researcher* 23(2): 79-96. doi: 10.1007/BF03219621.

Pennycook, Alastair. 1996. "Borrowing Others' Words: Text, Ownership, Memory, and Plagiarism". *TESOL Quarterly* 30(2): 201-230. Doi: 10.2307/3588141.

Reid, James, Yuka Hirata and Filippo Gilardi. 2011. "Student-Centred Transmedia Inspired Language Learning Projects". In *Proceedings of the Asian Conference on Technology in the Classroom 2011.* Osaka: IAFOR, 80-96.

Rolheiser, Carol, Barbara Bower and Laurice Stevahn. 2000. *Portfolio Organizer: Succeeding with Portfolios in Your Classroom.* Alexandria, VA.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Sterne, Jonathan. 2006. "Communication as Techné". In *Communication as … : Perspectives on Theory,* edited by Gregory J. Shepherd, Jeffrey St. John, and Ted Striphas. Thousand Oaks, CA.: Sage Publications, 91-98. doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781483329055.n11.

Stoltz, Steven A. 2015. *Embodied Learning. Education Philosophy and Theory: Incorporating ACCESS* 74(5), 474-487. doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2013.879694.

Subramaniam, Ganakumaran. 2008. "Confronting Asian Concerns in Engaging Learners to Online Education". *International Education Studies* 1(4), 10-18. doi: 10.5539/ies.vln4p10.

Ting-Toomey, Stella. 1988. "Intercultural Conflict Styles: A Face Negotiation Theory". In *Theories in Intercultural Communication*, edited by Young Y. Kim and William B. Gudykunst. Newbury Park: Sage Press, 213-235.

Tran, Thi T. 2013. "Is the Learning Approach of Students from the Confucian Heritage Culture Problematic?" *Education Resource Policy Practice* 12(1), 57-65. Doi: 10.1007/s10671-012-9131-3.

Vogl, Joseph. 2012. "Becoming-media: Galileo's Telescope". In *Philosophy of Communication*, edited by Briankle G. Chang, and Garnet C. Butchart. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 627-634.

Wacquant, Loïc. 2004. "Habitus". In *International Encyclopaedia of Economic Sociology*, edited by Jens Beckert, and Milan Zafirovski. London: Routledge, 315-319.

Wacquant, Loïc. 2014. "Putting Habitus in its Place: Rejoinder to the Symposium". *Body & Society* 20(2): 118-139. doi: 10.1177/1357034X14530845.

Watkins, Megan. 2005. Discipline, Consciousness and the Formation of a Scholarly Habitus. *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 19(4), 545-557. doi: 10.1080/10304310500322834.

Wetherell, Margaret. (2012) *Affect and Emotion: A New Social Science Understanding*. London: Sage.

International Journal of Transmedia Literacy - 3 - December 2017
http: //www.ledonline.it/transmedialiteracy – Online ISSN 2465-2261 - Print ISSN 2465-227X

67

Wu, Zongjie. 2016. "Making Person Through Confucian Exegesis". In *Re-invisioning Chinese Education: The Meaning of Person-making in a New Age*, edited by Guoping Zhao, and Zongyi Deng. Abingdon: Routledge, 93-115.

Zhao, Guoping and Zongyi Deng, eds. 2016. "Introduction". In *Re-invisioning Chinese Education: The Meaning of Person-making in a New Age*, edited by Guoping Zhao, and Zongyi Deng. Abingdon: Routledge, 1-11.