PAPER: New Narratives For Digital Learning

Abstract: Digital media, mobile and internet-based platforms, online learning, and an increasing range of participatory practices affect from whom, where and what we learn. This affects the narratives we construct as we learn, as well as the narratives about the learning process. This paper addresses how new learning practices with and through digital media challenge notions of a single narrative, a single literacy, and a single source or site of learning.

Résumé:

New practices associated with digital media are profoundly affecting many aspects of daily life. The flood of information online, and the increased use of mobile and internet-based platforms, affect from whom, where and what we learn, and how we construct narratives as we learn. This paper addresses how we learn with and through digital media and how this challenges the notion of a single narrative, a single literacy, and a single source or site for learning. Instead, narratives emerge from the interaction of existing and new social and technological conditions, e.g., as narratives of information emerge with the availability of resources – people, information, conversations, participations – on and through the web, and the melding of physical and digital locations and sources.

The new narrative for learning is an emergent effect of the implementation of digital media for teaching and information dissemination, but is not just an online effect. Instead, it is a change in learning practice for the digital age. This change accompanies transformations in online practices associated with Web 2.0 and myriad new applications and techniques. It includes new narratives of learning such as collaborative learning, teachers as facilitators, students as learner-leaders, and conceptualizations of technologies as ‘sites of practice’ rather than locations for information or applications (Goodfellow & Lea 2007, 2013). The narrative is no longer of learners as ‘empty vessels’, but instead as active, self-directed, entrepreneurial learners (Hase & Kenyon, 2000; Senges, Brown & Rheingold, 2008), creating their own user-generated contexts for learning (Luckin, 2010). While this learner may be independent, working through the ubiquitous medium of the Internet to gain knowledge, the individual is equally likely to be working with others, at a distance and through computer media. Such individuals learn and engage in the real-world practices of collaboration, cooperation, participation and community engagement, creating narratives around learning that involve people and resources met through multiple digital platforms.

This paper reports on themes that emerged from an expert workshop held in December 2011 (http://blogs.ubc.ca/newliteracies/). The workshop addressed the relevance of social and computer networks, multi-modality, context, and mobility as organizing principles for understanding the impact of digital media on how we learn, with strong emphasis on the way literate practices change and emerge as a result of new contacts and connectivity among learners. The paper outlines and summarizes key themes that emerged from the discussions and that provide direction on new approaches to learning – formal, informal, and non-formal – in the digital age.
The themes are:

1. **Literacies & Discourses.** Rapid, multi-modal changes in the means of communication beg for a redefinition of what literacy means in the information age, and hence what fluencies and practices are relevant in assessing what it means to be literate in today’s society. Relevant to this discussion is the notion of discourses (Andrews, 2010), which afford discussion of a wider range of communicative codes or modes while including attention to communication processes in a range of social situations and contexts (Kress, 2003). Also relevant is the trend to participatory culture (Jenkins et al, 2006), marking a shift from consumption to production (produsage, Bruns, 2007), and an new emphasis on participation, collaboration and the creation of new narratives. Together these change ideas of what is good learning practice, e.g., from answering questions to forming the questions themselves (Haythornthwaite, 2006; Haythornthwaite & Andrews, 2011).

2. **Co-evolution of Literacy & Technology.** This theme emphasizes the way practices of communication and learning emerge at the intersection of social and technical practices (Haythornthwaite & Andrews, 2011). This is seen widely in the way distributed and mobile communication technologies have transformed our practices of social, work and learning connectivity, e.g., in the impact of social media on youth interaction (Ito et al., 2008); changes in the balance of work and home life (Kramarae, 2001); changes to effect the distributed and global workplace; and the development of online communities, peer production and crowdsourcing (Benkler, 2006).

3. **Expansive Learning.** Contemporary practices of production – of software, information, social relationships – contains an active component of creation and re-creation, leading to a continuously emergent, permanently beta state of communal knowledge (Neff & Stark, 2003). This expansive learning leads participants to learn in areas where there is not yet a known knowledge base (Engeström, 2009). Key to this kind of learning is that the production of data, information, knowledge, and its collection, are in the hands of participants rather than an authority external to the participants, e.g., publishers, news editors, collection developers, etc.. As such, the way we learn online no longer looks like an instructional model, but instead resembles more the practices of expert learners (Scardemalia & Bereiter, 1996; Haythornthwaite & Andrews, 2011).

4. **Mobility & Ubiquity.** Narratives of mobility have, to date, considered the export of information to mobile devices. Yet a new perspective considers the mobility of learning itself as it occurs anywhere anytime. Rather than emphasizing the devices, this perspective addresses the practice of continuous, on-the-go learning (Vavoula, Pachler & Kukulska-Hulme, 2009). For formal education, such mobility shows that, as learning leaves the classroom, it also leaves many of the institutional structures that have shaped the learning experience: the sequestered space, the quiet library, and student study groups. New narratives emerge of what it means to be a student when called on to be a collaborative, peer-to-peer learner, even leader, as is expected in many online learning settings.

5. **Analytics.** Along with new ways of learning, there is also a concern about defining what metrics and information about learning are relevant and useful to provide as feedback to instructors, learners, and educational programs. The use of digital media leaves traces that can be captured, analyzed and provided as feedback to instructors and learners, and analyzed for research purposes. Tools and techniques that provide feedback on the learning process assist in providing awareness of others and their participation.
patterns, evaluation of individual and group learning, and support for the community (Siemens, 2010; see also http://www.solaresearch.org/).

6. Augmentation & Minimization. The themes above tend to address first round effects, but these effects are themselves creating the conditions for even newer narratives around the augmentation of learning. Technology can act as a ‘cognitive amplifier’, expanding our capacity to maintain different narrative threads, with multiple others, in a 7/24 fashion, aided by the augmented ‘external memory’ of the computer and the Internet. With such expansion come ideas of new narratives about how to use technologies to augment the learning process further by helping to manage these multiple threads, suggesting design directions for meta-narrative learning technologies. At the same time, a counter-balancing effect is the increasing ability to personalize and narrow down the streams of information and contexts in which one operates. Technologies can then as a minimizer. Questions then arise around how to balance augmentation and an expanding world with minimization and a small world.

7. Value & Visibility. Rather than a concern about privacy, this theme addresses the presentation of self, and of learning and knowledge when information is of more value the more people have access to it. Value was perceived in the ability for simultaneous viewing by multiple participants (such as parents and students, or collaborative learners), and how making visible the invisible opens up new possibilities for learning, making connections, and learning from and with others. The question that results is how do we take advantage of new technology to make visible more of the literacy, learning and narrative process.

8. Physicality & Locality. Finally, it is noted that technology does not equal practice, particularly in relation to learning and practice that require a hands-on eventuality. While narratives have been about tuning the technology to augment the physical, a new perspective acknowledges the pervasiveness of technology use and suggests taking a view of how the physical can restructures to support the digital. Overall the aim is to explore a narrative that entails both the physical and the digital, while acknowledging their interrelated narrative in contemporary society. This perspective is synergistic with considerations of locale and work in areas of community informatics and urban informatics (e.g., ‘smart cities’), but turns attention to learning. Questions that result are how to evaluate mobility in balance with locality, and the physical in relation to the technological as a joint ‘site of practice’ (Goodfellow & Lea, 2013).

References


