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Chapter 8: “From the table of my memory”: Blogging Shakespeare in/out of the Classroom

Peter Kirwan

Introduction

As the preceding essays in this section have demonstrated, scholarly practices in the higher education classroom have undergone a significant series of shifts in response to the digital revolution, bringing new opportunities and new challenges. The ability to teach undergraduate students from digital facsimiles of original Shakespeare quartos, to call up digitised performances, to display web materials from the latest production at Shakespeare’s Globe or to ask students with laptops and tablets to conduct in-class research, opens up a seemingly infinite range of possibilities. Yet with increased opportunities come increased expectations. Following my success in finding a copyright-approved system that would allow me to embed entire Shakespearean films on my adaptations module’s virtual learning environment (the quite wonderful Box of Broadcasts), I was pulled up short by student evaluations criticising the fact that only two of the module’s films were available.

The challenges of an on-demand culture extend beyond the expectation – natural to my students, foreign to me – that the Shakespeare movies I teach should be freely and legally available online at all times, or that world-class theatre should be available at convenient stops on the number 34 bus route between campus and Nottingham city centre (it often is but, inevitably, rarely at times conducive to student utility for essays). What we are still catching up with, pedagogically, is reflection on how the entire learning culture of young people is changing, particularly in the light of Web 2.0 technologies. Christine Greenhow, Beth Robelia and Joan E. Hughes (2009) very usefully summarise the literature in this area,

drawing attention to the fact that the vast majority of pedagogic literature on web technologies has responded to the Web 1.0 model, the internet of the 90s and early noughties which was a predominantly read-only resource. The students who are now entering Higher Education are the Web 2.0 generation, used to a read-and-write internet, and to producing content as well as absorbing it. Despite fears in the UK that rising student fees would inculcate an attitude of passive, 'fill-me-up' expectation among new undergraduate learners, experience seems to suggest that students ever more want to be doing.

The big specific change generated by Web 2.0 is that young people are writing more and more for their own pleasure, and that writing is being instantly put into the public sphere. Digital cultures have empowered young people who previously, in general terms, tended to be consumers of media to become producers of media. Blogs and digital phones mean that article writing, film-making, journalistic photography, audio recording, sound mixing and so on are increasingly part of a young person's basic skills set, and these are skills which can provide foundations for academic work. Yet despite the apparent modernity of the technologies at the heart of this increased activity, Tom Pettitt has argued that the shift represents a movement back towards the cultures of orality dominant before what he terms the 'Gutenberg Parenthesis' (2007: 1), the period stretching from the creation of materially stable texts enabled by the invention of the printing press to the breakdown of the stable text in a digital culture that prioritises 'sampling, remixing, borrowing, reshaping, appropriating [and] recontextualizing':

In many ways behind the times, I am castigating students who are in all other respects being trained to operate within a cultural system -- the digital media -- which is already on its way out of the Gutenberg parenthesis: an internet culture in which sampling and the rest are becoming legitimate. (2007: 2)

Pettitt's sense of his increasingly obsolescent standpoint is a frank and productive admission of the dilemma faced by teachers in maintaining standards while accepting what may prove to be inevitable shifts in the kinds of literacy appropriate to the twenty-first century.

Attempts to utilise and embrace students' pre-existing skills in formal pedagogic structures have been mixed.¹ While resources are becoming more accessible, their use is still learned primarily through friends, peer groups and extracurricular activities rather than within the formal structures that might teach students palaeography, for example. The assumption of many institutions now is that students will have access to their own computer and smartphone, but this raises the question of diverse financial means, technical expertise and social context. Ability and experience in the use of producing technologies ranges hugely and present a significant challenge to the teacher attempting to ensure a shared experience while also battling themselves with the refusal of an embedded PowerPoint video to play. At present, if Pettitt's model has weight, we are in a transitional moment where too often academics are unprepared for the learning culture of new students, and where students are unprepared for the rigour and self-discipline of independent study.

It is in this context that blogs demand fresh attention. Blogs offer a format in which many students are writing independently, writing often and writing passionately, and this has perhaps too often been held up as a negative. The dangers are, admittedly, significant. Tutors may worry about the introduction of poor or informal writing habits into formal work (especially the concern that SMS literacy is replacing grammatical accuracy) and the unreflective, fast-publish nature of the blog forum. Further, the proliferation of online voices does lead to issues surrounding the ability of students to recognise appropriate sources. While

¹ For a successful project enabling students to bring their own producing skills, see Kathryn Westwood's presentation 'The necessity of modern media in the teaching of Shakespeare and World Literature in schools', which also introduced me to Pettitt's concept of the 'Gutenberg Parenthesis'. <http://shakespeareineducation.com/2012/03/kathryn-westwoods-presentation-shakespeare-inside-out-part-3/> [accessed 17 May 2013].

it is eminently possible that a student may stumble across the latest thinking of scholars such as Holger Scott Syme on the excellent *Dispositio*, Adam G. Hooks on *Anchora* or Sarah Werner on *Wynken de Worde*, it is equally possible that the same student may be unable to differentiate these from the blogs of enthusiasts, polemicists (including the high-ranking blogs of anti-Stratfordians, a significant virtual community) or even fellow students.

However, catch-all judgements about the quality of electronic material are, as the above examples demonstrate, misleading and unnecessary. As the major citation systems develop ever more flexible ways to cite electronic resources, so too do teachers and students alike need to start acknowledging the importance of entering the blogosphere as a means of enabling self-reflection, critical awareness and intellectual independence among students.

Self-reflection

The personal blog, kept separate from academic activity, is a format where the student has absolute authority in controlling the terms of discourse. The blog author determines the blog's focus, style and content, and moderates responses. This has the dual function of allowing the author a genuinely free expression, while also at the same time constraining the author to a self-reliant presentation of the self; the author is at once liberated and exposed. This has in turn resulted in a noticeable shift towards a confessional culture. For academic purposes, this can lead to problems of formality: the prioritisation of the 'I', the lone unsupported voice asserting, liking and being anecdotal rather than critical. With social media outlets such as Facebook and Twitter inviting unconsidered comments and kneejerk reactions, the dangers of a lack of reflection have become apparent in high-profile media cases: as I write this, Paris Brown, Britain's first Youth Police Commissioner, has just

resigned following the revelation of allegedly racist and homophobic tweets made some years before taking on the role.

The wisdom of broadcasting one's most personal thoughts to an anonymous but deeply critical world may be challenged. However, the individual confessional does have a historical precedent appropriate to the student of early modern literature, in the commonplace book, which has useful pedagogic implications in the subjective appraisal of encountered work. I'm here adopting the important distinction established by Peter Beal and expanded by Fred Schurink between the miscellany - the random compilation - and the commonplace book, which 'record[s] extracts from a person's reading with some form of organization' (2010: 454). The model of the commonplace book has already been used successfully at the University of Warwick by Carol Rutter, Paul Prescott and others as an aid to Shakespeare workshop practice, as chronicled in Nicholas Monk's collection *Open-Space Learning* (2011). For Monk, Rutter and co., the commonplace book provides an ongoing reflective aid to accompany performance-based teaching. Students engage in workshop classes instead of traditional seminars, and rather than make notes during class, the commonplace books are used for post-seminar reflection and are supplemented with student research; adopting the commonplace format as a focused reflective pedagogic tool. On one course, these form part of the final assessment.

Reflective writing as pedagogic practice is integral to disciplines such as Drama and Creative Writing that seek the theorisation of practical work, and the commonplace book is an appropriate model for this, particularly as the books take on a life of their own and become attractive material objects in their own right, compiling pictures, quotations and other materials. Ownership of the physical book becomes an integral part of the process, the sense that the students is compiling a representation of and reflection on their own experience. Yet

this commonplace book has an audience beyond the author, in the assessors for whom the book is being compiled.

The commonplace book intersects with the personal blog in its articulation of experience for the benefit of both author (reflective) and reader (assessor). The value of blogs as a form of reflective writing has been widely discussed. William Rickards etc. acknowledge their use in allowing students to ‘further development, construct personal expertise, and explore identity’ (2008: 31). It is the third aspect, ‘identity’, that the blog uniquely enables, taking the personal reflection of the commonplace book and requiring the author to articulate it in a forum that will be read by others.

There are two problems. One is that I’ve already mentioned, the problem of maintaining the expectation of a certain level of sophistication in writing. The other is with ownership of the blog medium. If the popularity of commonplace books in the seventeenth century and personal blogs in the twenty-first is due to the sense of individual authority and control over a platform, then there is a risk of diluting the purpose as soon as these are subsumed into a formal learning environment. By systemising and assessing the individual reflective voice, we run the risk of encroaching on a student’s personal space and identity, which raises ethical issues, or risks ostracising students through our own attempts to show familiarity with the form. The visibility of public blogs is another factor to bear in mind. The biggest problem in getting student buy-in is the fear of exposure before peers, and a sense of uncertain expectation when adapting a personal voice to academic requirements. Yet this sense of risk is, of course, part of the pedagogic process. By integrating a form of the confessional into academic discourse, students are encouraged to build confidence in their own opinions, experience and modes of expression. Yet if individual self-reflection is to be standardised to an extent that it can be used pedagogically, we inevitably have to impose

restrictions on the form that that expression can take, potentially negating the very reasons for the success of individual blogs.

Blogging authority

Over recent years, the proliferation of online blogs, both in quality and quantity, has gone a long way towards blurring distinctions between professional and amateur voices, and this is something that several scholars have discussed in relation to the reviewing of Shakespeare. The Guardian, for instance, has its online theatre reviews but also its online theatre blog – both sections share writers, a house style and cross-reference each other; and both sections invite comments and active discourse from readers. Eleanor Collins theorises the shift in the use of electronic blogs and the merge of styles as a necessary result of a ‘post-consensus society that emphasises the validity of individual opinion over both collective and received wisdom’ (2010: 333). For performance criticism of Shakespeare, blogging now offers an acceptable and necessary resource – for those of my students currently working with a DVD performance of Greenwich Theatre’s *Volpone*, there are very few professional or scholarly reviews, and students are therefore encouraged to make use of amateur review sites to compare the thoughts of contemporary critics.

Collins’s notion of the post-consensus society is important when thinking about how and why we integrate blogs into classroom activity. For if this is one of the primary written discourses with which students are engaging, it seems counter-intuitive for tutors to shut down inquiry over concerns about the authority of the voices being encountered. Now there are limits to this of course – one student I taught on a medieval literature module decided to use as her primary source for an essay the blog of a student who had taken the same course the year before. Even this, however, opened up a very useful classroom debate about the

nature of research and the authority of primary sources. Rather than shut down the idea of blogs as research resources per se, we built into this an exercise where students were asked to search for blogs on the subject and rank them, in the way one ranks peer-reviewed journals, according to the criteria which they felt gave a sense of the value of the review – so from their first year of study, they were invited to critique and assess levels of authority, in a way which began developing critical faculties.

The student who writes solely for an independent essay, submitted privately to the School office and seen only by tutors, lacks the ability to understand their writing within a discourse of scholarly engagement. Conversely, their participation in social media gives them an equal (if often anonymised and decontextualised) voice in global popular debate, which requires a different set of argumentative and presentational skills and which invite response and counter-response. There is, potentially, a contradiction in styles of teaching that demand interactive engagement in the classroom but isolated, private writing when it comes to formulating intellectual activity in relation to summative assessment.

On my advanced module Screen Shakespeares, I teach the course partially through Twitter. Using the hashtag #shaxfilm, students are invited to tweet their responses to the set film for the week, to share links with one another to further resources and websites and to pass around reactions. More excitingly, however, the students were surprised and delighted to discover a virtual community of other Shakespeare film enthusiasts wanting to engage with the debates being carried out around the live classes. Over the course of a semester, tweeters shared their experience of seeing films and plays when first released, passed on suggestions for other films that students might enjoy and offered unique insights. Judith Buchanan, whose book on Shakespeare on Silent Film was recommended reading on the module, happened to join Twitter at precisely the moment we were discussing Frank Benson's 1912 *Richard III* and briefly joined the conversation; and during a week devoted to stage-to-screen adaptations

John Wyver, producer at Illuminations and tweeting on the company's behalf, fielded student queries about the process of transferring RSC theatre productions to the small screen. While Twitter involvement was an optional extra (with the tweets streamed automatically to the module's Moodle page to ensure that all students had access to the content whether or not they wished to join the social network), student feedback reported pleasure that the conversations we were having in the classroom were not staged or contained within a single module, but part of a live and ongoing conversation across the world.

Blogging knowledge

Twitter offers a light way into encouraging students to engage with a module in a 'third space' away from the live classroom and the individual study. By contributing visibly, students are encouraged to reflect on their own writing and to get feedback on their thoughts. Encouraging a more sustained series of outputs, however, can be more difficult. There are many examples of blogs being used as a part of formative assessment, with students required to regularly post updates related to specific exercises, but turning the blog format into a task-oriented project strips the blog of its personal identity. The main practical problem of using teacher-led blogs and forums is that they impose a very explicit hierarchy on interactivity – a teacher or student posts a blog or begins a forum thread, and students respond successively to that – there are clear patterns of dominance and subservience. These are sometimes very successful, but they yoke participants to a response format. An open-source forum such as Moodle, however, the virtual learning environment currently used at Nottingham, gives the opportunity for students to define and create their own discursive field. Specifically, on another advanced-level module on Shakespeare and Jonson, I'm utilising the ethos of wiki technology as outlined in David McInnis's chapter in this collection, encouraging students to

create their own data strands supporting a range of research projects that run alongside the course.

This builds on the work done at Warwick on commonplace books, and on a system that Monk et al. called 'knowledges' (2011: 13). 'Knowledges' are a means of ensuring that member of a workshop group takes responsibility for a different area of contextual research: Renaissance science, for example, or boy actors. Students pursue different projects independently and become the class's expert in a specific area, and they then bring those different knowledges to bear on the classroom situation. The practice is designed to bolster student confidence by allowing them to specialise in an area which no-one else in the class does, and instils a research ethos throughout the course.

The expansion offered on Shakespeare and Jonson at Nottingham is that, rather than research individually, the students contribute both to class and to an online 'knowledge hub' located on the module's Moodle page, turning the individual commonplace book into a collective electronic forum. Across each class of twenty students, a pair of students was assigned one of ten distinct knowledge areas.² Each group of four had responsibility for a wiki devoted to their knowledge area, which they updated regularly with their research: links, an annotated bibliography, book/article reviews, images, short essays and so forth. Students were given an initial reading list of five items, after which they were on their own, and three sessions in which they knew they would be called upon in class (for example, those students working on alchemy were called upon when discussing *The Alchemist*, *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest* to share their research).

Now independent research in the class setting isn't itself revolutionary, but combined with the virtual learning environment and the wiki technology, the virtual community

² Jonson's life; Shakespeare's life; The Globe/outdoor playhouses; The Blackfriars/indoor playhouses; boy actors; the King's Men; Jacobean politics; Jacobean comedy; Religion and the supernatural; Alchemy and renaissance science

combined with the live community to create a fascinating dynamic. The freestyle format means that students become guides rather than authorities, offering a way into their subject area for their peers. They are encouraged to format their work in such a way that it makes the research accessible, and in doing so build useful communication skills. It enables student creativity, allowing students to embed videos, links, images, whatever else they find useful. Finally, it requires students to consider the impact of their own voice, recognising their authority and responsibility lying behind the material. Those students who were more reticent to begin posting quickly saw the work being done by other students and drew from that motivation to ensure they were not letting the collective down. In both years that I have run this so far, by the end of the module there has been created a huge resource of student-created research on which the whole group can draw when approaching their assessments.

By focusing this on a wiki environment, too, it changes the nature of the staff-student engagement. The tutorial approach is light-touch, with my involvement in the wiki largely being to add links and ensure navigability. However, although the knowledge hub is freeform, it is embedded within the module's wider Moodle page and framed by an ongoing tutorial blog, where I go through a similar process of posting links and further reading that tie in my own research to classroom discussions. What has developed is a sense of the module as something which only partially happens in class, where class is a weekly event that provides a focus for an ongoing learning experience rather than being the thing in its entirety. In creating this, I am employing what Liam Semler, in his pedagogic work, calls 'Ardenspace' – the idea of a free-moving space, somewhere between the rigid court of Duke Frederick and the unregulated, formless court of Duke Senior in *As You Like It*. In Semler's work, the aim is to offer an environment in which students can explore collaboratively and unpredictably, making genuine discoveries. As the Moodle materials develop, I am able to

begin integrating them into classroom discussion, allowing the students to see their research becoming the driver of learning rather than a consequence of it.

Conclusion

This brief overview of activities cannot overview the broad range of possibilities opened up by encouraging online writing, whether through blogs, wikis or social media. Yet the pedagogic principles behind such activities have a shared aim – to take advantage of the relatively natural use of these media by Web 2.0 ‘natives’ both to encourage critical reflection on personal development and to introduce students to a discursive environment that may, in some ways, reflect the cultures of orality and unstable textual production from which the early modern period emerged....

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