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How to cite:

Lea, Mary and Goodfellow, Robin (2009). Academic literacies in the digital university. In: Literacy in the Digital University: The Relation of New Media Practices to Traditional Literacy Practices in the Academy and the Professions, 16 Oct 2009, Edinburgh University.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

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Version: Version of Record

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

http://www.open.ac.uk/researchprojects/lidu/p4_1.shtml

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Academic Literacies in the Digital University

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Academic Literacies is an international field of study concerned with literacies and learning in tertiary education (Lea & Street 1998; Ivanič 1998; Lea & Stierer 2000; Lillis 2001; Walton & Archer 2004; Thesen 2006; Ivanič 2007; Lillis & Scott 2007). The use of the term 'literacies' in the plural signals a view of literacy as engagement in a range of contextualised social and cultural practices around texts. It also serves to foreground the relationship between texts and learning from the perspectives of the different participants involved. Some recent work in this field has focused on online and elearning environments. For example, the relationship between the texts of students' online conference discussion and their written assignments (Lea 2000; 2001; Goodfellow et al. 2004), argumentation in online learning (Coffin & Hewings 2005), meaning making through the use of hypertext (McKenna 2006), power, authority and institutional practice in online message postings (Goodfellow 2005; Lea, 2007). In our book of 2007 (Goodfellow & Lea 2007) we used an academic literacies perspective to critique what we see as the focus in much elearning practice on the 'management of learning', at the expense of disciplinary pedagogies. We argued for attention to be paid to the centrality of texts, however mediated, in the construction of knowledge and the practices of learning.

Our current focus on the 'digital' (as in 'digital literacies' and the 'digital university') extends this critique to engage with three major discourses of technology currently constructing the 'digital age' in relation to education. The first is the metaphor of the 'digital native' or 'net generation' (Negroponte 1996, Tapscott 1998, Prensky 2001). The second is the discourse of 'Learning 2.0' - a movement for informal learning via internet communities to displace or restructure formal university study (Downes 2005, Weller & Dalziel 2007, Walton et al 2008, Seely Brown & Adler 2008). The third is the trope of the 'unbundled university' wherein core functions, such as teaching, research, assessment and accreditation, become detached from each other and are pursued independently in cooperation and competition with other specialised but non-educational providers (Baxter 2002, Katz 2008).

The ESRC-funded project 'Digital Literacies in Higher Education' (Lea 2009) responded to the discourse of the digital native, and in particular to two implications of that discourse: one by 'traditionalists' which suggests that the dominance of digital technologies in their personal worlds may impair students' ability to engage in serious academic study, for example, reading books and writing essays; the other by 'radicals' who argue that universities need to respond immediately to this new generation of students in realigning their teaching and learning activities with students' digital worlds, for example, by harnessing social networking tools like Facebook and Twitter in the curriculum.

This project investigated these propositions at three different kinds of institutions offering tertiary level provision in the UK: a post-1992 university offering a range of professional degree level programmes ; a further education college, offering foundation degree courses in addition to vocational certificates and diplomas; and a prestigious, long-established university offering primarily academic subjects at undergraduate and post-graduate level. The project adopted an ethnographic perspective (Green & Bloome 1997), taking a close up and contextual view of students' digital literacy practices. 34 students met with the interviewers three times over a period of six months. They described and showed in detail their own practices of reading and the production and negotiation of digital texts in the day to day business of being a student, both in the curricular and personal sphere. The methodology and findings are discussed in detail in Lea 2009 and Lea & Jones (in review) The data illustrate how participants were highly adept at drawing on complex, hybrid, textual genres, using a range of technologies and applications and integrating these into both their assessed and un-assessed work. This is arguably a more complex process than that involved in studying in the pre-digital era. It also illustrates the dominance of reading in a digital world; in many ways, bringing reading - in contrast to writing - to the fore in students' literacy practices. Despite the complexity and hybridity of literacy practices, however, students notably continued to rely



on the authority of the institution, which mandates the whole range of online resources and communications, including powerpoint slides, lecture notes accessed via the VLE, institutional email, recommended websites, and nominated commercial documents and reports. The drivers for accessing and using resources were therefore validation – implicit or explicit - from their tutor, or course guidance, even if they decided to access that resource through their own choice of technology

This research suggests that technologies have the potential to disrupt some of the more traditional literacy practices of the academy, but it also reveals the continuing influence of a traditional model of academic written discourse. Although it was not the main focus of the research, some of the participants offered hard copy or electronic rubrics for assignments as they talked through the range of resources they were drawing upon. Documents and cover sheets containing statements of course content and learning outcomes, descriptions of tasks and criteria for assessment of work, represented tasks and assignments largely in terms of the kinds of written genres involved: written examination question, assessed essay, learning log, written summary, written reflection, introduction, critical appraisal, evaluation, written argument, discussion. In course guides and assignment rubrics in all but the most technical and skills-based of the study programmes, assessment criteria drew on academic concepts such as: 'analytical approach', 'rationale', 'methods', 'critical evaluation', 'logic', 'argument', 'objectivity', 'evidence', 'scholarship'. These documents provide evidence of the ways in which established academic cultures of knowledge production remain dominant even in subject areas such where students are explicitly required to draw on a range of genres in completing their assignments.

The relation between the institutional mandating of new modes of knowledge, the persistence of conventional academic values in the curriculum, and the emerging digital communication practices at the boundaries of curricula, professional, and personal learning, is the complex zone in which academic literacies for the digital university are evolving. The discourses of Learning 2.0 and the 'unbundled university' promote, in different ways, the idea that technologies are disrupting an existing institutional and academic order in such a way as to bring about a crisis of authority and legitimacy in formal education, leading to the transformation of higher education institutions as both educational and commercial concerns. With the internet now able to provide learners with access to open resources that have previously only been available through enrolment in college courses, the argument is that 'courses' should give way to the interactions of virtual practitioner communities. Whilst the philosophical basis of this shift is in the values of individual empowerment and reciprocal community, the discourse promotes not only the transformation of pedagogy but also of the whole institutional basis of higher education, as the internet undermines the economic viability of providing proprietorial educational content on a large scale. The 'unbundled university' positions higher education as subject to the same structural disruption by technology that is currently impacting on the entertainment and other cultural industries. Institutions, as Katz argues, will have to put IT governance, and not academic governance, at the centre of their internal organisation. The public nature of the university is thus radically changed, as citizens operate as 'citizens of the institution' (p.24), rather than of the larger publics that the term conventionally implies (see Calhoun 2006).

Most importantly, these discourses construct the transformation process as inevitable, and only partially within the capacity of people to control. 'Technological changes outpace people's ability to 'socialise these changes' (Katz p.12), suggesting that the outcomes of technology-driven social and educational change are unpredictable. In an unpredictable world, the capacity of individuals to adapt and to quickly acquire the competences required for new practices becomes a key aim, a premise that has informed much of the research in the field of 'digital literacies' to date (Martin & Madigan 2006, Martin & Grudziecki 2007, Lankshear & Knobel 2008). Because of uncertainty about the cultural dimensions of practitioner and learner communities emerging online, digital literacy education has tended to focus on technologies and modes of knowledge, rather than on academic practice (unsurprising given the proliferation of predecessor terms such as 'electronic literacy', 'silicon



literacy', 'techno-literacy' etc). ICT 'literacy' education, for example, tend to focus on process rather than conceptualisation. 'Information literacy' education has a preoccupation with competence frameworks and the means of regulating and assessing knowledge in new textual forms. 'Media literacy' education has been positioned as a locus of struggle between tradition and creativity (e.g. Lankshear & Knobel 2003 & 2006) which emphasises new approaches to design at the expense of conventional academic critique. None of these perspectives, we suggest, provides an adequate framework for understanding and developing 'academic' discourse, including historically valued forms of argument and critique, in the transformed institutions, practices and pedagogies of the digital university.

To give an example of the kind of issue that digital transformation of the academy might raise: the rhetoric of 'digital scholarship' currently being developed in Open University and elsewhere, reconceptualises academic practice in terms of its technologies of communication. Present in this discourse are three key positions: that the development of online 'expert' communities and the spread of open processes of publishing and reviewing online changes the way academic knowledge is constructed and validated; that the development of digital tools for research and investigation changes the way research should be done; and that the use by academics of online means of building reputations and personal profiles will come to be recognised in the career and reward structures of institutions. These are all academic literacy issues, as they involve the development of social practices around academic communication, and digital literacy issues as they involve the development of new competences with digital media. However, none of these questions can be adequately addressed through a focus on the competences of individual academics, or on the design or affordances of environments to facilitate open communication. What is required is a perspective which explores the ways meaning is made and apprehended by the participants in digital processes of research, publication and review. and that is able to characterise the changing nature of authoritative knowledge in this social field.

Such a perspective applied to the predominantly virtual context of the digital university raises a number of methodological issues for researchers. First is the question of the richness of 'observation' made in virtual environments for ethnographic purposes. Many features of the contextual background of participants in online communications remain invisible to researchers, and the difficulties of arriving at valid interpretations of subjective accounts are exacerbated by the absence of knowledge about the situation in which the account was given. Second is the question of what counts as data and how the researchers are implicated in making that decision. In digital communication contexts many different kinds of practices and associated texts constitute the data. In exploring the processes of meaning making and participants' journeys through digital environments researchers need to make decisions, with the participants, about, for example, which screen shots to save, which photographs to take, which texts to keep as records of practice. In this sense, data analysis begins with data collection. Third are the ethical issues that arise as online and web-based texts display numerous identifiers, both institutional and personal, including personal details of other people who may not be part of the research. Anonymising such data is likely to be both complicated and time consuming, with implications in terms of technical resource and financial costs. In addition, the whole process of anonymising digital texts changes the nature of the text. Consequently, data used in outputs may no longer fully represent the original data.

We conclude that we need to pay much more attention to textual practice around learning and scholarship, and less to the technologies themselves, either as applications or in terms of the affordances that they enable. As teachers in higher education, we argue that we need to understand more about, and take account of, what is involved for students in integrating information gleaned from a range of contexts and using this to build subject and disciplinary knowledge in diverse academic, professional and vocational subject areas. As researchers and scholars we need to work for the reconciliation of new discourses of the digital with the continuing development of critical pedagogical and social practice in the academy and the public sphere.



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