The digitalised classroom in post-compulsory education: factors in the processes of education.

The increased emphasis on the use of information and communication technology (ICT) and new media technologies in post-compulsory further education is changing the way that students engage with this environment. This paper draws on data from a classroom ethnography as a means of exploring the nature of this increasingly digitalised learning environment and the impact that this has on the academic literacies and the classroom practices of its full-time students. The observations of both the social and intellectual use of technologies reveals how an extensive use of computers, as polyvalent artefacts, disturbs the level of engagement of the students, their academic literacies and their socialisation in these contemporary classrooms. An argument offered is that despite the expectations towards ICT in education, for this digital generation, technology is not a simple pedagogical ‘upgrade’.

Key words: further education, classroom, ethnography, students, technologies, cultures

The increased emphasis and expectations across the sectors of education towards incorporating ICT into the very infrastructures of institutions and the micro environment of the classrooms is now accepted. Technology is positioned as one of the elements in the assessment of effective and progressive education in both internal and external inspections (Ofsted 2009a) and initial teacher training (Ofsted 2009b) in Further Education (FE). It is also situated as a resource for improving the skills of staff and reducing their workload (Becta 2007).

This paper focuses on those classrooms of FE where technology, particularly the ubiquitous computer, is used extensively and it examines how this impacts on and at times disturbs this micro environment of education. It draws from the data of a classroom ethnography that took place at an FE college in Northern England where one cohort of media students and two cohorts of music students, enrolled on two year level 3 courses, were followed as they progressed through their courses. The music students were at a different, smaller site to the media students, who were based at the main college site, but despite this and the differences between the subjects the
activities that were of interest to this paper showed very little differentiation across the sites. As such, there will be no attempt to distinguish between the cohorts in any comments, as the intention is to offer a more generalised insight into these specific micro environments. Also, there were a small number of older students in the music cohorts, who were aged between 22 and 38 years old, but their approach to their work was so markedly different to the teenage students that this paper focuses on that to include them would extend it significantly beyond its intended focus. As with gender, no distinction will be made. The only significant differences were that in those moments when sociodigital resources were drawn on, within the classrooms, the female students would be less inclined than the males to venture on to, for example: Auto Trader, online games, or online videos that orientated towards accidents or physical sports e.g. stunts. The females would predominantly access social networking sites, or music videos and films, although the males would also access these. For this paper the interest is in 16-18 year old students, as a cultural whole, rather than determining any distinctions by gender or other typologies.

All the classroom sessions where the ethnography took place consisted of either one, or two, three hour sessions in a day, up to a total of 15 hours in a week. Depending on which course units were being studied there was also a number of practical sessions that took place outside of these classrooms. Importantly, all of the textual academic activities took place in these classrooms where there was a common, but limited range, of technological artefacts consisting of a dedicated staff computer and Smartboard and one PC for each student. In this paper, any reference to ‘academic’ will be as a convenient and overarching term towards those classroom based teaching and learning and portfolio evidencing activities that took place within a classroom.

Situating Further Education as a sector of post-compulsory education

To understand the context of this research it is worth spending some time introducing FE as a sector of education. It has evolved as being full of expectations for a diverse range of students and operates under a culture of endless change (Edward et al. 2007) and policy initiatives (Huddleston & Unwin 2008; Hyland & Merrill 2003; Jephcote et al. 2008; Weedall et al. 1989). It is increasingly positioned as all things to all people. FE colleges are viewed as multi-purpose institutions (Robson et al. 2004) in the local community; working with local employers towards the creation of a flexible learning society and workforce (Harrison et al. 2003); contributing to a competitive and skilled labour market, and establishing a culture of lifelong learning amongst adults. The sector locates itself in post-compulsory education as establishing a parity of esteem and an increasing unity between the vocational and academic for those aiming at entry into education, or employment, or for a progression within education (Huddleston & Unwin 2008). For 16 and 17 year olds it represents an alternative to staying on at school for A levels. For those students who are represented in this paper it was a conscious choice by them to enrol, for whatever reason, but for many they sought a more relaxed and adult world than they had experienced at school. The following comment was typical:

Ash:….like at college it's so much more relaxed overall than at school.
Later, students found that the expectations on them to work more independently in this environment conflicted with their previous enculturation into the regimes of compulsory schooling, which they still carried with them.

Seth: And then you're like, oh right, well if he's not going to force me to do the work, should I still do it, should I put that extra effort in?

Debbie: I'm not being stereotypical, but (...) I think because of our age, when you've got someone like at school...yes, I did lack a lot of confidence but I still got the work done because you had teachers following you around to classes having a go at you. Obviously, I don't want my college tutors to start shouting at me and giving me detentions, but erhm (...) like just someone to be behind your back nagging you.

Despite these students viewing college as an altogether different experience than they had known at school in these modern times FE lecturers are firmly inculcated into a discourse of performativity (Ball 2003; Simmons & Thompson 2008). This climate is concomitant with an intensification of labour where working over contracted hours as a measure to maintain an increasing workload is often the norm (Clow 2005; Salisbury et al. 2006; Simmons & Thompson 2008). Operating in such audit focused cultures with a persistent hail for higher standards (Coffield & Edward 2009) and higher accountability can reduce adventurous pedagogy and restrain curriculum innovation (Meng 2009) with a subsequent move towards less risky acquisition views of learning (Hodkinson 2008). It generates an aversion to non-official forms of practice (Avis 2005) and a subsequent more minimalist approach to practice (Avis et al. 2001). Within this surveillance culture, where quality systems measure and record pedagogy and performance, there inevitably occur individualistic adoptions of discrete instrumentalism to meet expected targets (Avis 1999; Avis et al. 2001). This runs parallel with reduced levels of professional autonomy and inadequacies in funding (Gleeson & James 2007). The result is potential low levels of moral and motivation amongst teaching staff (Avis & Bathmaker 2009; Wallace 2002) and an increasing emergence of ‘sites of struggles’ and disenchantment within the sector (Harrison et al. 2003). This is not to isolate FE as a special case, as other sectors of post-compulsory education are similarly embedded within such pervasive managerialist cultures (Sparkes 2007). As can be expected, there can occur quiet examples of agency and associated emotional labour that operate in more discrete, underground conditions. These inevitably go above and beyond any contractual obligations (James & Diment 2003; Jephcote et al. 2008), especially from those less bounded part-time staff (Jameson & Hillier 2008).

The range and complexity of the factors that impact on any traditional notions of sites of learning within FE was drawn into perspective by the recent large scale research project, ‘Transforming Learning Cultures in Further Education’ and the depth of academic literature that emerged from it (see, for example, Hodkinson et al. 2007; James & Biesta 2007). This, and other research (Gibson 2004), highlights the ranging layers of cultures and the diversity of students that enter and engage with FE. They enrol for a range of reasons with their circumstances being equally diverse. Prominent in this discourse are issues surrounding emerging identities, life histories and social and cultural factors, both internal and external to education (Hodkinson & Bloomer 2001). These causal factors frequently destabilise attendance and retention.
(Hodkinson & Bloomer 2001; Longhurst 1999) and consequently career decisions and progression can be non-linear and socially and culturally complex (Bloomer & Hodkinson 2000a; b; Hodkinson 1998; Hodkinson & Bloomer 2001; Postlethwaite & Maull 2007). It is also far from unusual for individuals, or factions of these students, to be challenging in their behaviour; a factor that has been consistent over recent decades (Avis 1984; Jephcote et al. 2008). A partial, and in some cases significant, incentive for 16-19 year old students to attend a full-time course is the receipt of a personal EMA (Education Maintenance Allowance) income of up to £30 per week (Maguire 2008). This is dependent upon parental income and satisfactory attendance, behaviour and progression by the student. Combined with the disappearance of any previous youth employment market (Rikowski 2001), this draws into full-time education those young people who may not otherwise have considered it. As a result some students initially attend for little other incentive than their EMA monies.

The rationale in this paper for clarifying the nature of FE, as a sector and the range of students that enrol, is that it is important to situate these students and the research within FE as a whole. Throughout the research all the students, who ranged in their socio-economic backgrounds that remained on the course were equally passionate about their subject and they sustained that interest throughout the course, which for 16-19 year old FE students can be quite unusual. All were aiming for progression to either the next stage of their course, a higher education course in the same subject, or finding employment that would allow them to continue their interests. A very small number did withdraw from the courses but only because they realised that their interests had changed and they moved positively on to other futures. Their behaviour in the classroom was not a concern in any conventional disruptive sense, although as will be illustrated their approach to their coursework was paradoxically potentially damaging to their planned progression.

The technologising of further education

The incorporation of learning technologies into FE has spread rapidly from its nascent and fragmented usage (Jameson & Conole 2000; Jones et al. 2000; Martin et al. 2000) to its current high profile status. Its expected embeddedness within an institution and the curriculum is now paramount for the internal and external inspections and assessments of teaching and learning that take place. Despite its already wide spread use there are further strategies planned to increase it in future curricula (Becta 2008; 2009), emphasising that very little in education will ‘remain untouched by complex technological factors’ (Hickman 2001, p.1). There is evidence though that despite any rhetoric these new technologies are not widely utilised in some colleges (Fowler 2008), but in the classroom sessions of this research computers were intensively used as the primary resource.

This emphasis on an increased use of ICT has resulted in an element of resistance from some lecturers, especially amongst the traditional craft based trades, who see their previously understood status of holders of expert knowledge potentially displaced in the digital classroom by the more computer literate students (Le Gallais 2009). Although, throughout this research it was very apparent that all of the tutors were very capable and highly skilled with the range of technologies used and they viewed them positively as both a professional and academic resource. The media tutors were particularly situated and employed as experts as they all held degrees
associated with digital media and a number had worked in industry in roles such as web designers.

The digital classroom as a social, cultural and educational space

The computer has been offered as the primary resource of new technology in these digital classrooms, one that affords enhanced teaching and learning. Situated within the classroom as a social and cultural space though and the discussion needs to factor in its unsanctioned use.

In the conventional lexis of education the classroom is a firmly located and understood place, formed by social histories (Kress et al. 2001). As an environment of new technologies though it is no longer contained by its four walls (McLuhan 1957); it is no longer a sanctuary (Willis 2003) as the elements that form education and the digitally literate actors that converge and inhabit this space disturb and rupture any previously understood boundaries. It is within this context where the integration of digital technologies into the classroom represents a seemingly rational, yet problematic, approach. Students, as a digitally literate generation of young people, devour new communication technologies and media to satisfy their need and their capacity to reach out socioculturally (Livingstone & Bovill 1999; McMillan & Morrison 2006). Their symbiosis with technology and new media is a generational phenomenon. Their empowerment, from the accessibility of the technology, and the capacity to be digitally always-on, becomes culturally and symbolically challenged when operating within the constrained boundaries and expectations of the dominant and increasingly performative culture of education (Ball 2003; Simmons & Thompson 2008).

As a polyvalent artefact of education and youth culture, the computer adjusts passively according to user input and need. Its use as a technological tool of education becomes destabilised by the sociocultural interactions students, as young people, associate and expect with digital technologies (Young 2006), often to the detriment of their academic performance (Kubey et al. 2001; Rutter 2009). The technologies of new social media and the internet confound the boundaries of the cultures that operate within the digital classroom. This disrupts the educational space so that it becomes an emergent space, ‘multidimensional, resonant and open to other spaces’ (Wise 2000, p.299). The classroom is then transformed and situated as both a performative place of education and a negotiated digital space which operates between cultures that, within this space, emerge as hybrid. Any attempts to revert to a more disciplined, monocultural educational space, by the expectations of the lecturers, formed by policy, are received as a strategy of symbolic violence (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992) by this generation of sociodigitally communicative students. It is one embodied within the language (Žižek 2008) and spatial confines of the Other, which they counter by using the cultural tools at their disposal. Massey, captures this spatial essence and comments that, ‘space is always under construction. [It is] a product of relations-between, relations which have to be carried out, it is always in the process of being made. It is never finished, never closed. Perhaps we could imagine space as the simultaneity of stories-so-far’ (2005, p.9). It emerges as a space of interrelations; it is ‘both a field of action…and a basis of action’ (Lefebvre 1991, p
It ‘is [seemingly] always in the midst of language and…always in the process of making identity’ (Rutherford 2007, p 155).

**Student resistances and ways of operating**

It is a rare day that an FE student is seen without a mobile phone, or an MP3 player, or using social software as the rapid spread of mobile and social technologies has been a modern phenomena (Ling & Donner 2009), one that modifies everyday practices of contact and interaction (Thulin & Vilhelmsen 2007). The college had implemented a policy effectively banning student use of mobile phones and social software in the classroom; such had been the volume of incidents across the curricula. Despite this, as the following example illustrates, there often developed a war of attrition as students, so enculturated into rapid sociodigital contact and response would either openly, or discretely, maintain social contact within the classroom sessions.

Alan (lecturer): Well, you're getting this addiction, some of them can't, CANNOT leave their MySpace unchecked in case someone leaves a message, one of their friends, you know. "But she might have left a message for me" (mimicking a student) AND? "Well I've got to get back to her", "No you don't", "Pardon but I do, I've got to get back to her". It's like, “Oh-h-h, okay then". You know, there's this NEED to know, there's this fear of being left out of a circle that they don't like.

Some enterprising students, desperate to access banned websites, would run proxy servers as an attempt to foil the college firewalls.

Hazel: I think it's unfair that they've actually completely banned it, to be honest cos sometimes you need, you need sometimes you actually NEED to go on it and you're like the proxy sometimes doesn't work and you're sat there going, "Fuck’s sake".

It is worth recalling that these classroom sessions were commonly three hours long, with a break part of the way through, and within this time frame some students viewed their unsanctioned use of social software as a reward, or as a casual break from their work.

These actions are worth contextualising with Rebecca Solnit’s recount of members of the Pit River tribe who start to wander when they encounter stress as they find that their ‘acclimated surroundings [are] too hard to bear’ (2005, p.19). Although a seemingly tenuous relationship is offered between North America and a classroom in Northern England these, ‘little tactics of the habitat’ (Foucault 1980, p.149) begin to make some sense if they are understood as students cultural, ‘ways of operating’ (de Certeau 1984, p.30) within the classroom. For de Certeau, cultures consisted of levels of cultures interwoven with each other and he used the example of a North African living in France in the middle of the twentieth century, in low-income conditions, drawing on their own culture as a means of coping with working within this constrained environment. To try to understand the students’ actions it is also worth
returning to the notion of symbolic violence, translated as being able to access the resources of technology, yet only being expected to use that technology for educational purposes. The stress from these constraints is such that by subverting the technological resources of education they wander into their ‘own space’, thus creating a hybrid, more plural space within the dominant order.

He….creates for himself a space in which he can find ways of using the constraining order of the place or of the language. Without leaving the place where he has no choice but to live and which lays down its law for him, he establishes within it a degree of plurality and creativity (de Certeau 1984, p.30 original emphasis).

If students are using computers for both their academic work and their sociocultural activities within one geographical space, the formal educational space, then there starts to emerge from these actions a way of understanding how students view the space of the classroom and the affordance of the computer. It is agential, but the agent is one formed by negotiated and hyphenated identities that are enacted on by acculturated technologies (Willis 2003). The emergent student culture then becomes one, ‘conditioned by places, rules and givens…it is a proliferation of inventions in limited spaces’ (de Certeau 1997, p.viii).

Sally (learning support assistant): I certainly think like their [students] perception now is that now the computer is just a lot more than for work…in the morning actually I’m surprised when I come in how many people have gone straight onto YouTube, or straight onto their email account rather than starting their work…

Hazel: You HAVE to go on MySpace. Cos you get so bogged down with coursework it's like, "I need to take five minutes" (laughing).

Scott: It gets kinda boring, I normally just check 'em [social networking websites] and then turn 'em off.

Despite students’ notions of how briefly they would stay on these non-academic websites, through observing and without exception, the reality was that their conceptions of a brief, or few minutes’ activity, would be significantly longer. This would be to the point that some students would achieve very little during a three hour session, or even a full day. The outcome was that towards the end of the academic year there was a sudden realisation by students that their academic procrastinations, afforded by social technologies, had a repercussion. If they wanted the grades to progress to university, or the next year of their course, they needed to focus on their work a lot more.

Scott: I used to be really bad, I mean some days I used to spend full days watching Family Guy then I realised, you know, I really can't do this anymore.

Sean: It all depends cos sometimes you can go on it and you've got like no messages or comments, other times you'll be having like ten people on to talk to, always, and you just get like into the zone of that and it's just like, "O-h-h I've got work to do, see ye". You've got to get back to the work.
For other students self-policing, even towards the end of the academic year when they needed to submit their final work, still proved difficult and they sought release from the pressure through a familiar medium.

Hazel: Because there's so much stress piled on you, because it's piled on so much, like you think, "Oh I'm not going to get this done, might as well go on MySpace", then you lose it…

As some students exerted agency towards their futures they also became more reflective towards the course and the pedagogic styles of the lecturers. One of their lecturers had a very didactic approach to teaching and the students’ initial response had been very mocking. In the second half of their second year they reflected on this and his approach was now welcomed as they saw their futures potentially slipping away.

AB: It's strange with Ian because I can remember one time when the whole class didn't like him, but then all of a sudden you've started to appreciate him more.
Liz: Yeah
Emily: Yeah, we thought (…) well….
Emma: Cos he stopped teaching us for a while didn't he.
Liz: Yeah.
Emma: And then we was all like kinda missing him.
Emily: We thought he was too pushy but then we came to realise, ye know, that he's not too pushy, the other teachers aren't pushy enough, so…..
Liz: Better to like be pushed than like not to be pushed at all.

**Textual practices and engagement in the digital classroom**

As technology conflates educational and sociocultural spaces, diminishing understandings of context and situation, its use also has had a profound change on how academic literacies and skills are perceived and enacted. This is a fluid process of change and it seems little time ago that the media was engulfed in deficit comments towards the changing literacies of young people, through their use of text language (Drouin & Davis 2009; Tagliamonte & Denis 2008). Yet, as an observer and assessor of students’ work it is a number of years since I was last aware of any examples in FE. Al was a very intelligent and bold student who frequently frustrated the lecturers with his lack of focus towards his academic priorities in the classroom, yet his comments were representative amongst students who had used text language in the past.

Al: No, no, like before like with using MSN, you know, you get tied into putting, you know, for like *are* you'd put an *r* and *you* you'd put an *u* and that, you know, shorten words (…) Like from like two years ago (…) well no, last year I started just typing properly again and like with texts I'll put apostrophes and everything in and I won't abbreviate anything. The only time I abbreviate things is when I've not got that much room left to do anything, so I'll like take it off in commas and stuff, but no.
What was noticeable in all of the sessions, and it is worth recalling that the ethnography was in computer rich classrooms, was a lack of any hard copy textual artefacts: books or any other hard copy sources of information were noticeably absent. Each room had the computers around the perimeter, so that the students sat facing the walls. Located centrally were long tables but these were noticeably barren of resources. The computer truly fulfilled the concept of ‘work stations’, one which students seemingly had no need to move away from as they conceptually contained all the resources that they needed for their time in the classroom. A small number of students would occasionally make written notes, for example, if a lecturer was outlining unit requirements, but predominantly they would start their work directly on the computer. The only other artefacts that were frequently visible were either mobile phones, or MP3 players, situated next to keyboards, as cultural talisman. Ritually situating these in their place was one of the first actions of many students at the start of a session. They would only occasionally and briefly be checked for text messages. In classrooms with little technology this would not be the case as college lecturers would often recall their problems trying to prevent students constantly accessing their phones during these sessions.

As recounted above, the students would be distracted by the sheer accessibility of the new digital technologies, the cultural positioning of these and an expectation of being always-on. In this environment, this confounded any expected direction of attention towards coursework and the classroom, as a space, became fluid, layered, disjointed and problematic by the temptations ‘on tap’. The sheer choice and draw towards the more social software was too tempting: ‘…the space is so saturated, the pressure of it all which wants to be heard so strong that I am no longer capable of knowing what I want’ (Baudrillard 1988, p.24-25). Students would consistently have at least one or more, non-academic web pages visible on their computer screens and they would, frequently and rapidly, toggle between them in an apparent state of continuous and partial attention (Stone 2008).

    Sean: Yeah, I know there'd be something else to distract me though, if it wasn't MySpace it'd be music, or something.
    Simon: Yeah, YouTube.
    Sean: Yeah, YouTube or …
    Simon: YouTube, just watch videos (laughs)
    Sean: or eBay.

For the lecturers, it could be very difficult from a distance to interpret what activities the students were engaged in as their seated posture could only be described as ‘screen focused’. It was devoid of any cues that could be used to read their level of engagement (Robinson 1994), or any cultural performances (Youdell 2005; 2006) and the students would take advantage of this.

    Emily: I usually just go on check my messages, reply, and then go off again.
    Liz: Unless you're in conversation (laughing)
    Emily: Yeah then…(all laugh together).
    Liz: If someone doesn't notice it then I go on just to like check and then I think, "Oh no one’s noticed" so I stay on for a bit longer and then I stay on for a bit longer, that's it.
This related to one of two factors that emerged from the observations that were surprising and unexpected in a classroom full of young people. When the students were sat at their computers there was little sense of interaction amongst them, a lack of any internal social learning amongst peers. This was also problematic towards any theoretical constructs, such as learning communities (for example, Gee 2005; Wenger 1998; Wenger et al. 2002). Semiotically, it read as a space inhabited by a number of young people, rather than a group of young students in an educational space. The social interactions required for students to work with each other, or support each other and then all to gain from the experience (for example, Bruner 1985; Vygotski 1978; 1986), where noticeably absent, apart from when there were occasional lecturer led group activities. The efficacy of more dynamic events such as a Freirian culture circle (Freire 1976; Lankshear 1993), or those that could be anticipated in an educational space, ‘of a continuous reciprocal interaction between cognitive, behavioural and environmental determinants’ (Bandura 1977, p vii) were noticeably absent. Any socially mediated support was more through students informally reaching out digitally beyond the boundaries of the classroom, though this appeared to be an occasional practice.

Debbie: I mean if I need help and the tutor isn't available I'll know that some of the first years that I know they've got like their own specialities so I'll go on MySpace and send a message and then they help me and they do it a lot as well. So we kind of whilst doing our work we're talking about our work and then the first years are asking are asking like us what have we done for our final project…

Although this appeared to operate successfully as an occasional underground resource, the thought of formalising academic activities via social software drew cautionary responses from university students. They viewed its more formalised use as an educational resource as encroaching too far into ‘their’ time and space (Madge et al. 2009). Selwyn (2009), offers a similar cautionary tale where any educational references in Facebook by university students were predominantly for post-hoc critiquing educational events rather than being academically supportive for, or in, such an event. As one lecturer comments later, once social software is applied educationally students do find it challenging to remain within its educational boundaries.

The second and related surprise was that the rooms could unexpectedly be very quiet. The lack of interaction among the students was often as a result of them sitting, ‘screen focused’, at their computers, many with earphones in listening to music. Some lecturers permitted this, as long as the students appeared to continue their work, as it seemed to help them focus more. Some could be watching a video, which may, or may not be related to their coursework needs, or without any earphones but still usually with a range of academic and non-academic websites running. Any signs of excitement, or activity, were often only towards ‘interesting’ non-academic online finds.

Sally (learning support assistant): I find that most people just sit (…) there’s one person sitting in front of their computer and they’re just generally doing things on their own and it’s only if something’s particularly funny, or interesting that they get someone else in.
Lecturers did offer course related resources for the students on YouTube, or MySpace. But they found it difficult to concentrate on these, as the pull from less academic temptations was too strong.

Bob (lecturer): We use YouTube a lot for tutorials because people record tutorials for the software that we're using and I've put stuff up there. I've recorded myself doing something so they can watch it whenever they want...but that opens a can of worms of, "Why are you on MySpace?", "Oh I'm doing my work", and you know they're not, so it just opens the flood gates and they can be on there anytime. So I don’t do that anymore.

Students, although often totally engrossed if they were on sociocultural websites, reacted surprisingly to using the internet as a learning resource and expected a more interactive pedagogy from the lecturers.

Emily: Certain things it's good to get on by yourself, but if you don't understand something they just say, "Go on the internet", they don't teach us it.

Liz: Like we know we don't ever get like taught anything, it's just if we need to learn something it's like, "Do a tutorial [online]", not like you teach us a tutorial.

The lecturers expected the students to work independently and develop their skills, especially in the second year, so that they were ready for university, or other futures. The three hour sessions then offered the lecturers the opportunity to try to maintain their workload of administrative tasks, or work with individual students. But the students still yearning for a more interactive pedagogy found the amount of time they were using computers unbearable.

Jim: It can sort of get a bit monotonous. I find it can drag on a bit and (...) you need some sort of, something to break the day up really. You're sort of doing the same (...) been sat up in front of a computer all day. It basically tires me out. I get like a couple of pieces of work done and then I think, oh, I've done them, and then I don't have any motivation to do anymore work. It's like...

Helen: But, it's definitely, definitely does get too much when you're sat in day in day out, on the computers (...) Doing that all the time, it drives you crazy, definitely.

Despite these comments and the reminders from lecturers of alternative hard copy resources that were available on the site, for the students, the computers held all that they needed for their work. However, despite the raft of social and other non-academic websites that they would access, when it came to their coursework they would adopt a more conservative approach when researching online.

Amy: Wikipedia, it's like God to us people. I think Wikipedia's all you need, unless there is certain times there isn't stuff on there but most of the time everything's on it.
Alan (lecturer): Again, that's another issue, it's a major issue actually with us because you tend to get (...) okay, you say "Go and research this" and you tend to get all the same research back because they've just used Google, you know, and you try to instil in them that there's other ways that you can get this information.

Once students had found some information that may be useful for their work the predominant strategy would be to copy and paste from the websites into a Word document and then either type into that text, or open a new document and work between the two copying and pasting and modifying the text. This was a rapid transition from the working processes that these students had recently been used to at school.

Seth: Yeah, well it was all hand writing, wasn't it, at secondary school and you came here and it was all computers, it was kind of a bit of a step up.
Scott: Yeah, it's definitely (...) difference was when we were at school we had (...) well in my lessons, my school didn't have that many computer rooms, we only had computing for certain things and then we wasn't always allowed on computers, so we had to actually hand write it.

In this short transition the students adapted very quickly to doing more or less all of their work on computers. This was not without any concerns, as one lecturer commented that if the students could not digitally manipulate a document, even at a base level, then they failed to engage with the content.

Alan (lecturer): I give my briefs out, a printed copy, and then I put a brief up on Moodle for them to access, because I say, "Always keep looking at it because I might add something to it" and the latest brief I did I had clippings, newspaper clippings, which I'd scanned in and then turned into a pdf and included this as part of the brief. But I only put these scans in with the pdf and they can only be viewed online. But they found it (...) the amount of students I actually went round and said, "Have you read these clips?" because if you read these clips you've basically have got the whole thing to complete the project. They couldn't get their head round reading a newspaper clipping that had been turned into a pdf, into an electronic form you know, because you couldn't, you couldn't like copy it because it was a jpeg image really and the amount of them that said, "No, I haven't read it" and I kept saying to them how important it was to read these clips.

A concern towards these processes of digitally manipulating source texts, and then the subsequent level of summarising, or synthesising this into their ‘own’ texts is a separate issue towards ownership of ideas and concept development. But, importantly the students did not retain any ‘paper trail’ of digital notes, or drafts, which could be revisited as evidence for their stages of development of a document. An essay would be developed and repeatedly saved over and over as one file. This coincided with a lack of any notion towards a structural plan. The strategy would be to set out at the start of an essay and work through until they considered that it was finished. There would often be basic elements missing, such as an introduction, or summary. Some unit essays would be surprising in length, up to 8,000 words, when 2,000 would have
been sufficient, as students cumulatively copied and pasted from websites with occasional glances at the learning outcomes. But with no evidence of any word capping there was no need for them to exert any discipline towards conciseness. Although, the lecturers did find that when the students submitted their final work to them by email that there was a constant need for them to return the work to the students with feedback for improvements.

Phil (lecturer): Some students will send sometimes seven, or eight times, it's like a game of tennis.

As such, some students did appear to view the lecturers as a resource for identifying errors in their work.

AB: Do you spend much time proofreading your work?
Stan: No, cos Dave [lecturer] usually does it.

The lecturers were aware of this dilemma but students would regularly fail to submit their work by a deadline date, or if it was submitted it may only be a partial submission. The result was a regular need for extensions and the lecturers, very mindful of course targets, would adopt a more instrumental approach to achievement that they found uncomfortable. Towards the final stages of the course students were reflective towards their actions.

Scott: I kinda wish we'd have been (...) the only thing that I wish about this course is that they'd have been stricter with us with deadlines and it just (...) I know it's -
Sean: And more of it last year -
Scott: Yeah (...) definitely stricter deadlines, because I mean I've been like (...) I remember when our digital units had to be in and I was like, "Oh, I can't be arsed to do it, today; I just won't hand it in", and the was like last, what (...) probably last January, or whenever it was, and I just..and to think I've only just completed them now, it's pretty..it's pretty stupid.

Despite this, the students could still be distracted by the sheer accessibility of sociocultural websites and resources when, in a race against time, they tried to complete their work at home. It is worth noting, that the students rarely did any coursework at home during the term and the lack of available resources at the college for students to work outside of timetabled sessions meant that coursework would usually only take place within the sessions.

Scott: It's cos I've got like a quite a bit to do and erhm...but normally during that time [at home] I get distracted for like half an hour at a time, and then I'll go back to it, so, half the time is actually just spent looking on the internet, and stuff like that.
AB: Has it been productive though?
Scott: Erhm I think it has, well, it has to be productive really..I mean we've only got a week left to hand it in. I mean if we want to go to uni we've got to have it in by Monday, and if we don't, we don't go.
Ultimately a number of students paid the cost and as a result enrolled on foundation degree courses rather than the full degree courses that they had always aimed for.

Scott: I mean I've kind of ruled out, cos I want to go to university next year I've actually kind of ruled out actually going for a BA. I've said I'm going to have to go for a foundation cos I just know I won't get the points I need to get in.
Sean: Yeah.

Towards a conclusion

There is no doubt that digital technologies are firmly located in FE and there is the expectation that they will increase in depth and breadth across the curricula. This is understandable and young people also expect these new technologies, they have grown up with them and certainly these students, when asked, could not imagine life without them. The recent theorisations of post-typographic literacies, for example, new literacies and multiliteracies (for example, Cazden et al. 1996; Kellner 2000; Knobel & Lanksheer 2007; Lanksheer & Knobel 2006; Lanksheer & Knobel 2008) have yet to reach the classrooms of FE as a mode of deliberate pedagogical practice. None of the lecturers, when asked, foresaw any radical, or otherwise, changes to their relatively conservative pedagogy in the near future. This was despite a very distinct lack of lack of technophobia and ages ranging from early twenties to late fifties, with experiences in the profession from less than a year to eight years.

But, as this paper has intended to show, digital classrooms are not automatically a successful reactive panacea for this digital generation. Technology mediated education is just as demanding as education without technologies, potentially more so as technology does come with a user-value as it satisfies according to cultural needs (Miller 2008), and this represents a dilemma. The social actors in the space and place of the classroom rotate between priorities; the digital classroom emerges as a heterotopia (Foucault 1986), of spaces of both educational and sociocultural affordance within the dominant space of education. Having been involved with FE for a number of years each cohort of students is dynamically unique but the attraction of accessible sociodigital technology remains unabated in whatever guise is currently popular.

For this level of student, and at this stage of their learning journey, their approach and engagement with the course and the distractions of sociodigital technology is challenging their lecturers. As this research discovered there is the paradox of the students having a clear passion towards their subject, but in the majority of cases ultimately needing to take an instrumentalist approach to their work in order to achieve and progress. Yet, some still remained distracted by the sheer accessibility of the technologies, to such an extent that their futures were potentially placed at risk. It is important to recall once more that these were not disruptive students, in the traditional sense; they were polite, intelligent and with firm notions of their futures.

Timetabling, room availability and the amount of time in a session needed to work on the elements of a course unit, and also learn the necessary skills rationalised the long classroom sessions. Despite this, digital classrooms do emerge as somewhat ‘stuck places’ (Lather 2007, p 149), which only becomes apparent once you go behind the
closed doors. Students still gain their qualifications, with some perhaps not achieving what they had originally aimed for, and they move on. Focusing on the priorities of education in the presence of accessible sociodigital resources does become a demanding process for the students, one which locates itself with a pragmatist claim, ‘that we grasp and use different types of tools, including texts, in different ways’ (Hickman 2001, p.19). But, instead of these tools complementing each other as a bricolage of educational resources there is a cultural portal that competes for attention. What is causal in this context is both complex and compound as students and their classroom cultures do not manifest themselves as some homogenous group (Fowler 2008; McLaren 1999). Students need engaging and motivating but there are times when they are expected and need to work independently to explore their subject, develop skills and accumulate evidence towards their qualification. This is the zone wherein a challenge lies.

The manner that students appear to approach their academic work, at this stage of their education, is troubling. From the accessing of information to the final textual output, their practices and level of engagement with text is lacking in sufficient transparency. Hence, how and what they are summarising, or synthesising is not apparent. This coincides with a seemingly conservative level of searching for information online, with the subsequent pushing and pulling of that textual information around, using the functions of Word, until it is in some sort of considered state to submit for assessment. This points towards an extension of this research, as literacies in this context are not what was apparent a number of years ago and although ‘new technologies generate new literacies’ (Leu et al. 2004, p 1607) the ecology of these environments are educationally specific, yet fluid and constantly evolving.

Any aims towards the expected independent approach to learning were diminished by students consistently being unable to resist accessing non-academic technologies. This coincided with a general lack of criticality towards their work, with a concomitant expectation for lecturers to proof read it in the subsequent ‘tennis match’ of emailing the work to and fro between student and lecturer until it was to a satisfactory standard. An important factor was that the extensive use of computers, in this context, appeared to dampen the potential of any face to face socially mediated learning amongst peers. Noticeably, the student who used social software to access support from other students in a different classroom did not first consider approaching the ‘experts’ within her own room. I wonder though, as a strategy that was obviously successful, how long it would remain that if extended, taking into account the cautionary tales of formalising such resources. The implication is that there may need to be the room made for such endeavours if the policy restraints towards curricula and pedagogical innovations could be loosened, thus raising the ‘designer identity’ of practitioners (Meng 2009).

As the primary focus of the research had been towards the students, what did emerge was the dilemma that lecturers are placed in. There is no doubting the workload and expectations of performance upon them and this appears to situate them as functionaries, rather than visionaries. They were unaware of any practices, or theorisation, towards new modes of teaching this generation of students. They did what they considered to be a ‘good job’ and were reflective on student behaviour and performance, and very mindful of the distractions for students of the non-academic
affordances of digital technologies. These lecturers were very committed to their subjects, professionally and personally, but the potential of any new ways of teaching this digital generation is not reaching them in a time when new technologies and new media should be generating excitement amongst this educational community. Perhaps located within FE there needs to be the space allowed for visionaries? The now formal expectations on FE lecturers to complete and record their continuing professional development (CPD) each year can result in a performative approach which has little impact on practice (Orr 2009). Often the only time that pedagogical development is approached is through the mandatory teacher training requirements at the start of careers. Or, as an internal and instrumental awareness building exercise when quality inspections are expected, for example, a two hour session on: How to deliver a Grade 1 lesson. Any onus, in this case, may be toward the agency of individuals, but as was offered earlier this can be difficult when audit cultures encourage conservative instrumentalism and restrain adventurous forms of pedagogy.
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