

Traces of self: online reflective practices and performances in higher education

for the Association of Internet Researchers Conference, Copenhagen, October 2008

Jen Ross, Higher and Community Education, University of Edinburgh

Abstract: This paper explores some conceptual issues emerging from my research into the question of how students and teachers negotiate issues of identity, authenticity, ownership, privacy and performativity in high-stakes online reflection in higher education.

The traces produced by online reflection are traces of a cultural moment and a political imperative, as much as traces of individuals. This paper critically examines how a humanist discourse of a 'true self', which can be understood or revealed through reflection, masks the increasingly invasive character of educational practices which demand confession and self-surveillance as evidence of progress and learning, and asks: in what ways might working online complicate, corroborate or undermine notions of the 'true self' in these contexts?

Preface

Jen: what kind of identity do you feel that you constructed as a, as a blogger on this course? If you think about it that way.

Adele: um [pause] I think [pause] I think it was [pause] I felt it was more me than some of the other things I'd been using for this course, for instance Facebook. Um, compared to Facebook I find much more that you're constructing your identity for Facebook because you choose which photos you take, or with your, interests and and things like that. I never found that reflected me very honestly whereas um, the blog, obviously you're trying to um portray yourself in a positive light um because it's up for assessment and everything, and um, yes as I say before you're maybe not always totally honest because you you wouldn't write anything too negative or too critical in it but, um, but I don't have the feeling that it's, that I put on a different identity for it. [pause] em, also because even if I didn't write anything very personal in it, um, things that I was writing about work for instance or, um, they were really mine, or the notes that I wrote about the um the texts or what I thought about the texts, I never had the feeling that I was making this up or or um writing it from a different perspective.

Jen: yeah [pause] Yeah so Fa, so Facebook is like a, like a performance I guess and and you didn't feel that about the blog is that, would that be fair to say?

Adele: Um, yeah. I mean, uh, performance. [laughter] It is, it is, maybe it is still a performance but in the way, in a way that, you're always performing somehow I mean you know if if I was, if this was a face to face lecture I would also in the lecture or towards my lecturer be different than I maybe am with friends, um [pause] you know I think identity is made up of so many shades and it's, you can't really say the one is your true identity and the other one isn't. I think as long as you're not putting on a totally false identity. There are very many different aspects towards it. And the blog, um, yeah I, I didn't, I never felt, um, I I was being false in those, I think.

(extract from an interview with Adele, postgraduate student on a distance course partly assessed by reflective blog)

Introduction

The extract above is from one of my early interviews with students who are engaging in assessed online reflection. Adele touches on many of the key themes of this paper, the purpose of which is to explore some conceptual issues emerging from my doctoral research in the Department of Higher and Community Education at the University of Edinburgh. The research is looking at the question of how students and teachers negotiate issues of identity, authenticity, ownership, privacy and performativity in high-stakes online reflection in higher education.

My theoretical approach draws primarily from Foucault, Derrida, and from poststructuralism. The 'traces' of the title are meant as both inscriptions (what traces we can find of gaps, silences or other meanings in language and practices) and archives (the traces we leave behind, as with computer mediated communication).

Although there are specific technologies currently associated with online reflection in education – primarily electronic portfolios (e-portfolios) and weblogs or 'blogs' – I deliberately avoid focusing in what follows on any particular technology, and instead refer where possible to 'online reflection' or 'online reflective practices'. Lines between different online environments are constantly shifting and blurring anyway, and a focus on practices rather than technologies offers better scope for exploring the issues which are significant to me.

There is an emphasis in what follows on policy and practice in the UK, which differs in important respects from, for example, North America or Europe. In particular, the UK's Quality Assurance Agency's Progress Files initiative (QAA 2000) requires universities to provide structure and support for personal development planning (PDP) for all students. This policy move has resulted in a flurry of interest in reflection, especially online reflection, and institutions are drawing from a variety of sources (for example vocational and professional disciplines, careers and employability centres, postgraduate transferable skills units) and attempting to embed PDP at a number of different levels, including by assessing it as part of the formal curriculum. This policy is having a big impact on how reflection is perceived and integrated in HE in the UK: "as enshrined in PDP... reflection is now expected to form part of every student's analytical learning-to-learn armoury" (Clegg 2004, 292).

Discourses of reflection: an array of meanings

Fendler (2003) draws out four interrelated theoretical 'threads' of the educational uses of reflection: Cartesian rationality, Dewey's reflective thinking, Schon's reflective practice, and feminist concerns with voice and agency. She argues, correctly in my view, that:

different historical influences have contributed complexities to the meanings of reflection... Today's discourse of reflection incorporates an array of meanings: a demonstration of self consciousness, a scientific approach to planning for the future, a tacit and intuitive understanding of practice, a discipline to become more professional, a way to tap into one's authentic inner voice, a means to become ...more effective..., and a strategy to redress injustices in society.... It is no wonder then that current research and practices relating to reflection tend to embody mixed messages and confusing agendas. (19)

What this means for those of us who wish to conduct research into reflection and reflective practices in education is that it is always important to attend to the nuances of the use of

the word reflection where it appears in the literature and in educational guidance, and to look critically at the assumptions underpinning it (including our own assumptions). When values such as authenticity are called into play we should acknowledge that these, too, can be complex and contested (see for example Kreber et al 2007 on authenticity). The notion of 'reflection' can carry multiple and shifting meanings.

Overall, however, reflection in education is grounded in a humanist discourse of a 'true' or 'central' self which can be revealed, understood, recorded, improved or liberated through the process of writing about thoughts and experiences. This discourse is problematic for two main reasons:

1. it assumes a knowable, malleable yet cohesive self at its centre.
2. it masks the increasingly invasive character of educational practices which demand confession and self-surveillance as evidence of progress and learning.

I will return to the assumption of a cohesive self in the next section.

My position on the political nature of reflective practices is primarily informed by a Foucauldian understanding of neo-liberal governmentality, where governing power is de-centred and located within individuals, who become responsible for their own surveillance (Lemke 2001). The goals of self-regulation, authenticity and personal development are intimately connected with governance, the market, and the creation and control of the professional. Rather than being diametrically opposed to a performative discourse, as some who write about reflection claim (see my discussion of Barrett and Carney in the next section), learner-centred discourses underpinning reflective practice in higher education are

easily transformed into the kind of instrumentalism which underpins the increasingly dominant training and enterprise culture. ...learners can be more readily manipulated under the guise of democratic participation and personal empowerment. This humanistic discourse... encourages the idea that social change is purely and simply a consequence of individual 'self-fulfilment'. (Usher and Edwards 1994, 29)

The personal and professional development agenda in higher education constitutes individuals as particular sorts of 'subjects-in-process', for whom no amount of development is ever enough: "All professional workers need to be developed. Moreover, there should be no end to this process - the true professional knows that learning is for life" (McWilliam 2002, p1). The pressure to be constantly developing shapes individuals to meet the market's demand for flexible, self-regulating workers who will accept employers' demands for "explicit confessional critical reflection" (Fenwick 2001, 82), and even to internalise these in forms of voluntary self-surveillance and confession, an idea I return to in the last section of this paper, looking at blogging practices.

I believe that the rhetoric of self-fulfilment and self-awareness masks the increasingly invasive character of educational practices which demand confession and self-surveillance as evidence of progress and learning. These practices are fundamentally prescriptive, being bound, as Hargreaves argues, "within the ethical code of [a] profession" (2004, 200) (I think we might just as easily substitute "ethical code" and "profession" with "learning outcomes" and "course" here). As we will see, the move online, and towards 'high-stakes' implementations, heightens some of the problems associated with reflective practices.

Raising the stakes: defining high-stakes online reflection

“What we ask students to do is who we ask them to be.” (Yancey 2004, 739)

I find it helpful to consider online reflective practices in higher education as fitting into four main categories:

informal: some students, tutors, lecturers and researchers engage in reflective practices, primarily blogging, outside the formal structures of their institutions. These practices can be intimately connected with research, teaching and learning. Indeed, for some academic bloggers, reputation and authority are at stake, raising questions about the extent to which these practices are voluntary, or are seen by those who engage in them as necessary and even mandatory parts of their scholarly identities.

non-academic: activities, structures or processes put in place to support transferable skills, PDP, and employability agendas. These are usually unrelated to formal coursework, and are often supported by Careers staff, personal tutors or directors of study, or provided as optional and non-supported activities through an institutional e-portfolio or purpose-built PDP system. These activities are both dependent upon and intended to foster self-motivated learners who value reflection and are prepared to invest time in writing about their own progress in an institutionally-provided or -sanctioned digital space (Clegg 2004). The evidence so far indicates that take-up by students in these initiatives is low, but the rhetoric around these activities will be increasingly heard as universities invest heavily in systems to meet their obligations under schemes such as the UK’s Quality Assurance Agency’s Progress Files policy initiative (QAA 2000).

low-stakes: online reflection (like its more established ‘offline’ or ‘paper-based’ sibling) is often included as part of a course or programme as a non-assessed, non-compulsory, peer-assessed or minimally formatively assessed component. In some cases the reflection is intended as a developmental stage towards a summatively assessed project. In other cases it is supposed to be entirely student-led and (particularly in professional education) habitual as students strive to become members of professional communities which prize self-regulation and continuing professional development. In addition, discourses of “effective” or “deep” learning often privilege the ability to reflect and self-regulate as the hallmark of a good student (Nota et al 2004), and this wider discourse puts pressure on both learners and teachers to be seen to engage in and support reflective practices, even if these are not integrated in to the curriculum or given weight in the form of marks. Teachers are often wary of assessing reflective writing directly as it is assumed to be private and therefore an inappropriate object of judgment or measures of quality (Hargreaves 2004, Hinett 2002). These competing discourses (to be a good student you have to reflect, but reflective writing is private and belongs outside the academic gaze) may partly account for the many reports in the literature about confusion and modest participation from students (Tosh et al 2005) in low-stakes reflection.

high-stakes: reflection which is summatively assessed or which serves a gatekeeping function in terms of entry, progression or continued membership of a profession or professional body is what I am calling ‘high-stakes reflection’. The specific rubrics or standards applied to these practices vary from discipline to discipline and course to course, as do the models of reflection they are based on¹, but they usually involve judgments of

¹ for example: Borton 1970, Kolb and Fry 1975, Schön 1983, Boud Keogh and Walker 1985, Gibbs 1988, Brookfield 1995, Moon 1999, Johns 2000, Rolfe 2001.

critical thought, the application of theory, evidence of growth and development, and the impact of institutional learning on individual practice.

One key issue documented in recent e-portfolio literature concerns 'conflicting' or 'competing' paradigms – 'positivist' (product-driven, performative, externally assessed, based on externally defined outcomes), vs. 'constructivist' (process-driven, reflective, learner-constructed outcomes) (Barrett and Carney 2005). The model of a learner-centred and -owned process, which is intrinsically motivating and a stepping stone towards lifelong reflective practice, sits on one hand, while on the other are institutional and professional demands for accountability, evidence and the performance of professional or academic identities (ibid). Arguably, the move towards database-driven storage of portfolios has exposed rather than produced these apparent tensions, as it lends itself more to assessment-driven and administrative uses than do local portfolios (paper-based or electronic, but not stored in a central database) (Kimball 2005).

Barrett and Carney's positivist and constructivist paradigms are also sometimes described as 'map' and 'mirror' portfolios. However, I want to argue that in high-stakes reflection, the apparent tension between these 'conflicting' paradigms is in fact an intrinsic part of reflective writing. When what is being assessed or judged is the learner's ability to be reflective, then reflection itself is performative.

To describe this performativity, along with 'map' and 'mirror', I propose a third metaphor: high-stakes reflection as 'mask'. I have identified six (overlapping) genres of mask:



Disguise:

The idea of a person's 'true self' or, in some cases, their deformity, being hidden behind a mask is an extremely common metaphor in art, literature, popular culture and in everyday life. Power is also often described as being 'masked': "Modern 'power is tolerable only on condition that it mask a substantial part of itself. Its success is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms' (HS 86)" (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982, 134). The image here is called "The Treacherous Patriot Unmask'd"²



Performance:

Theatrical traditions around the world involve performers donning masks to portray different characters. The distinction between performance and disguise is extremely blurry, but we might say that disguise is primarily intended to hide something, while performance is primarily intended to show something.³ Goffman's (1969) work is extremely helpful here in untangling some of the complexities of identity performance.

² image from the National Portrait Gallery collection

³ image from the British Museum collection

**Protection:**

Protective masks are worn while doing dangerous work (fighting or welding for example). Armour is an interesting sub-genre because it is both protective and a display of strength designed to intimidate an enemy.⁴

**Transformation:**

“Demon masks are still used in healing rituals in Sri Lanka... One of the most powerful cures... is a masked performance in which the demon associated with the ailment, and others who may also have played a role in causing it, are made to appear” (British Museum, online). Formal, ritual performances involving masks are transformative in the moment, but may also have a lasting impact on communities and individuals.⁵

**Discipline:**

The scold's bridle was used in Scotland from at least the mid-sixteenth century to punish women for talking too much, nagging, or inappropriate speech – it worked by restraining and sometimes injuring the tongue⁶. Other forms of discipline involved masks which simultaneously restrained or injured the wearer and publicly humiliated them⁷.

**Trace:**

The death mask (Mary Queen of Scots' is pictured here) constitutes a physical trace or archive of the person who has died. It is obviously not *for* the person it represents, and nor does that person have any say or control over the matter – making it an interesting route to exploring agency and archive in online reflective practices.⁸

So, using the metaphor of the mask, high-stakes online reflection may:

- offer a narrative of the student's self which disguises their more complicated or perhaps illegitimate (Hargreaves 2004) thoughts or experiences;
- allow or require certain types of performances – for example that of the 'good student', or the 'autonomous learner';
- be constraining, painful, or transformative as the student's voice is disciplined (Foucault 1975) through the analytical interventions of teachers, peers or professional mentors;
- be traces or archives by which a student's virtual face can be captured – with or without their knowledge or consent (Kimball 2005).

⁴ image from the Royal Armouries Museum collection

⁵ image from the British Museum collection

⁶ <http://www.1911encyclopedia.org/Branks>

⁷ <http://www.corkscrew-balloon.com/misc/torture/37.html>

⁸ image from Lennoxlove house, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/scotland/edinburgh_and_east/5236154.stm

In the extract which opened this paper, Adele touches on many of these notions. She speaks of both disguise (“you're maybe not always totally honest because you you wouldn't write anything too negative or too critical in it”) and constraint (“obviously you're trying to um portray yourself in a positive light um because it's up for assessment and everything”), and performance as a feature of any interaction (“you're always performing somehow I mean you know if if I was, if this was a face to face lecture I would also in the lecture or towards my lecturer be different than I maybe am with friends”). She also, however, says that there is a limit to the performing that can or should be done in online reflection – that it is acceptable: “as long as you're not putting on a totally false identity”. The next section of this paper discusses and problematise this idea, and the ways in which online reflection both undermines and insists upon certain constructions of self.

“you're always performing somehow”: layering, authenticating and archiving

The subject of post-structuralism, unlike the humanist subject... is constantly in process; it only exists as process; it is revised and (re)presented through images, metaphors, storylines and other features of language, such as pronoun grammar; it is spoken and respoken, each speaking existing in a palimpsest with the others. (Davies 1997, p275)

My hypothesis is that working online, and the rise of compulsory reflection in the form of assessed reflective practices, may complicate humanist notions of the ‘true self’ in educational contexts. For instance, Hargreaves (2004) argues that compulsory reflective practices are essentially narrative in character. She claims that: “in producing narratives for assessment students are being asked to produce a story, and... in nursing (and possibly other professional settings) only three ‘stories’ are legitimate” (199). She identifies these as ‘valedictory’, ‘condemnatory’ and ‘redemptive’ narratives (200). In constructing a narrative for the purposes of assessment the successful student understands which kinds of stories are legitimate, and shapes her words accordingly. What is the relationship of these narratives to a true or authentic self?

Poststructuralist theorists conceive of subjectivity and language as intimately entwined. This is a conception which fits well with many of the features of working and being online, where mediated ‘virtual’ selves problematise straightforward notions of unitary or stable identities (Turkle 1997). However, the process of subjectivity formation is not unidirectional, and the poststructuralist subject, online or off, does not choose from an infinite number of possible selves which identity to perform. The metaphor of the subject as palimpsest (a manuscript where previous writing has been scraped off so that the paper can be reused, but traces remain) is one in which the self is inscribed by multiple traces of language, as much as it is speaking and respoken itself, as Davies puts it above. The relationship between subjectivity and language is symbiotic: “Lives are narratable as coherent in terms of the categories language makes available” (Belsey 2002, 51). These categories of coherence map on to embodied situations: gender, race, class, sexuality and (dis)ability. They also map on to available social discourses and contexts, out of which the subject may construct meaningful identities. As Hargreaves argues, there are legitimate narratives in different disciplines and professional contexts which “discipline” members and prospective members into certain understandings of themselves and their identities. It may be impossible to conceive of ‘being a nurse’, for example, without reference to the categories of coherence and cultural meanings that ‘being a nurse’ makes available.

To compare the subject to a palimpsest in process, though – even one which is both inscribing and inscribed – leaves us with the problem of specifying what exactly might constitute the ‘paper’ of the metaphor. Is there an essential self after all? Perhaps, though not one that can be known outside language:

experience, like sexuality, surely does not exist in the raw, in its natural state, outside the order of language and culture. Experience is lived as differential, and difference is the mark of the signifier. Experience inhabits the symbolic order, whether in a state of submission or resistance to it. (Belsey 1994, 10)

Or perhaps there is the material body constituting the core of our ‘self’ – a problematic idea, particularly as we work online and move into the territory of what Haraway (1991) described as ‘cybernetic organisms’ or ‘cyborgs’. Whatever we choose as being fundamental, we should ask, with Butler: “what kinds of constructions are foreclosed through the figuring of this site as outside or beneath construction itself?” (1993, 28). We might think of these closed off constructions as ‘traces’, in the Derridean sense – the (n)ever-present origin, that which is absent and always already unspeakable when we pretend – for the sake of being able to speak at all – that concepts like “self” are clear: “The trace is not only the disappearance of origin... it means that the origin did not ever disappear, that it was never constituted except reciprocally by a nonorigin, the trace, which then becomes the origin of the origin” (Derrida 1997, 61).

Online reflective practices occupy the territory of experience and selfhood in especially volatile and shifting ways. The notion of an authentic, choosing, reflecting self is further undermined by the complexities of digital representations, which are like liquid – always in motion (editable, non-material), but often leaving permanent traces (archives).

It has been claimed that foundations are particularly ripe for subversion online. The multiplicity of identities has been shown to be particularly pronounced within certain kinds of environments on the internet, as: “people are being helped to develop ideas about identity as multiplicity by a new practice of identity as multiplicity in online life” (Turkle 1997, 260). However, the internet is not a homogenous whole, but a patchwork of different kinds of spaces and tools, and the ones most likely to be used in higher education are those where online identities are meant to map fairly closely on to offline ‘student’ or ‘teacher’ identities and bodies (virtual learning environments, for example). Much as reflection is supposed to authentically mirror a stable, autonomous self, so the “walled gardens” of institutional learning spaces online are supposed to provide the authentication necessary for both learner and teacher to feel sure that others (and they) are who they are meant to be. Logging in, in other words, forces us into certain subject positions (Land and Bayne 2002, online).

Furthermore, students themselves may strongly resist a loss of control they see implicit in the possibility or experience of multiplicity or instability of identity online. Bayne (2005), in her research on learning cultures online, writes that students feel:

danger in the threat to the 'real' self by the online, constructed self, as though the real self is something fragile, protected by a boundary which is too easily transgressed... In constructing an online persona we again risk a dangerous loss of control. In [one student's] account, maintaining a coherent self is a balancing act; perhaps the possibility of the online persona makes the highwire a little less taught ('you may lose your balance, you know, in yourself') – there's a possibility that,

without the safety net of our commitment to a truthful, unitary identity, we might fall permanently into another (untrue) version of ourselves. Identity formation online becomes a performance here, with the risk of the role taking control of the player, of the actor becoming the acted upon. (online)

Students may therefore commit with extra intensity to 'authenticating' the self they perform in reflection online, in order to regain or maintain a sense of control in a digital space which invites them towards a dangerous fluidity. This authentication may readily take the form of efforts to 'prove' their sincerity through what Foucault describes as the 'obligation to confess', a possibility that reflective practice makes available and possibly actively encourages (Gilbert 2001). The student may in this case be both 'penitent' and 'listener', in the terms of the confession (Hewitt, in Gilbert 2001, 202), when they try to gain a secure footing online through confessional reflection, and to be "authenticated by the discourse of truth [they are] obliged to pronounce concerning [themselves]" (Foucault 1981, 58). Ironically, the structure of the confession offered (or at least pretended at) a mask of anonymity which these online reflective practices, by their nature, do not allow. So when Adele explained, in the extract which began this paper, that her blog was "more me" than some of her other online identities because there was less self-conscious choosing of how to present herself involved, and laughingly said that "you're always performing somehow", she was also at pains to make me aware of her sincerity within the blog itself: "I never had the feeling that I was making this up... I never felt, um, I I was being false in [blog entries]". Students are disciplined from without and within in online reflection by urgent demands for authentication. Such demands may be both tempered and reinforced by an awareness of the permanence or potential exposure of the traces being set down online.

Database-driven technologies for *storing* the data produced in online reflection may, in the case of public or potentially public reflection (blogs, for instance), produce a radical recontextualisation:

Digital archives allow situational context to collapse with ease. ...search engines can collapse any data at any period of time. (boyd 2001, 33)

At the same time, and regardless of the extent to which it is public, the archive constitutes a form of compulsory memory over which we may have little control: "we do not produce our databased selves, the databased selves produce us" (Simon 2005, 16):

Within such archival fixity and retrievability students will never be able to escape their past. There is a loss of redemptive possibility from the digital database which, according to Poster (1996, p.182) is 'perfectly transferable in space, indefinitely preservable in time' and 'may last forever everywhere.' (Land and Bayne 2002, online)

Like Kimball, I consider this archival fixity and recontextualisation to be potentially antithetical to the supposedly constructivist and learner-centred pedagogies which underpin much reflective practice:

the goal of persistence for database portfolios holds up the possibility that a freshman essay trying out something controversial—toying with anarchism, for example—might come to light years later. Students' awareness that their work will persist and be visible to people far removed from their teachers might discourage them from openly grappling with new ideas. (Kimball 2005, 454)

However, the “institutional appetite for data” (2005, 428) Kimball wants to shield students from is only part of the picture of online reflective practice.

A cultural moment

We can see in current blogging practices both within and outside academia a convergence of the rise of the concept of personal branding (Peters 1997, Lair et al 2005), and what Scott describes as the “cultural tendency to seek out confessional narratives of self-disclosure” (2004, 92). The difficulty of sustaining such a convergence was described in a recent newspaper article by Emily Gould in which she recounts the collision of her personal and professional blogging life (Gould 2008, online). However, increasingly this is precisely the sort of convergence that bloggers, and their audiences, have come to expect. Curtain (2006) characterises the primary emotion of the blogger as one of anxiety:

When a blogger consults his or her statistics about hits/visits/pages, s/he reinforces the need to create content that will induce those measurements of a public’s attentions. (Even a public of one.) Anxiety may be the primary emotion associated with giving accounts of blogging, and perhaps of blogging itself — Do I updated enough? Why don’t I write? Who is reading me? Why aren’t there more? What do they think about what I say? Have I said enough about enough... (online)

Bloggers often appear to see their practice as not only authentic, but visibly so:

In place of the stream of consciousness within posts, the weblog itself becomes the stream — a stream of individual posts, each of them representing a particular moment in time and a moment of consciousness. By reading down the page and back through the archive, one can get to know a blogger better... Do the same with your own blog, and you can get to know yourself. (Ewins 2005, 373)

The idea that the blog as a whole is a reflection of a knowable self is a powerful one, both for bloggers:

On the vast majority of diary weblogs which are not fictional, the writing becomes an opportunity for self-discovery; Miller and Shepherd note that “bloggers, however, seem less interested in role playing than in locating, or constructing, for themselves and for others, an identity that they can understand as unitary, as real.” (Holbrook 2006, 11-12)

and for their audiences. Research is showing that blog readers have strong views about the personal blog as a genre, and expectations about the authenticity of bloggers:

“... commenters view the blog as a non-fiction genre... the value of a blog rests on the authentic authority of the person behind it... This desire for an authority whom readers can trust, and for knowing whether a writer is ‘real’ or a fictional persona is particularly powerful among online audiences, perhaps because the faceless, unmediated aspects of online publishing make it easier than ever to publish anonymously or pseudonymously. Aware of the constant possibility that a fictional text may be posing as non-fiction, readers online have been exhaustive in investigating suspicious texts” (Freidrich 2007, 62-3)

Holbrook (2006) discusses this in light of Kitzmann’s linking of audience expectations to Lejeune’s theory of the ‘autobiographical pact’:

Kitzmann ...compares the fictionalization of blog entries to a violation of Philippe Lejeune's 'autobiographical pact' (59), the contract of trust formed between the reader and the writer, the autobiographical pact is based on the reader's recognition that the name of the author, narrator, and protagonist are the same, and that these three seem to share a common identity. (9)

Holbrook goes on to stress, however that it is the *assumption* of truth that matters, and that many bloggers play with Lejeune's autobiographical pact (9). As well they might, because at the same time as authenticity takes centre stage in the blogger-reader relationship, there is increasingly the notion that it is essential for success in today's world to cultivate and manage a highly visible "personal brand". This discourse is managerial and market-driven:

A strong personal brand identity ideally can endure for decades... To be successful, aspirants must adapt to the growing maturity of the marketplace, competitive threats, changes in social mores and values, proliferation of communication channels, and other factors that serve to challenge brand resilience. How frequently and how radically the identity is transformed to sustain depends on the aspirant's sector. (Rein et al 2005, 349)

Change and development is framed here as a market demand rather than a personal need – quite different from, and arguably more superficial than, the pedagogical models of reflection discussed above. The message, however, is the same: change, and be seen to change. The promise (or threat) of a personal brand which lasts for decades has echoes of the archive, but is recast as not only a benefit, but one which can and must be harnessed and controlled by the 'aspirant'. Indeed, Eichorn argues that the concept of the archive itself is changing as a wave of self-representation emerges:

In blogs and other social networking spaces, the drive to collect and re/present one's self is apparent in a myriad of emerging forms of expression. These forms or forums... are one part of the radical reconfiguration of the archive currently underway. (Eichorn 2008, 3)

Conclusion

In this paper I have described what I see as some interesting theoretical issues impacting on high-stakes online reflective practices:

- the humanist discourse underpinning reflective practices;
- governance, the market, and the discipline of confession and development;
- the performative nature of assessment, and assessed reflection;
- masks as metaphors for understanding how students may knowingly perform or (in the case of the trace) be performed in high-stakes reflection;
- the complexity of identity and authenticity online;
- archives and the permanence of online data;
- cultural understandings of blogging.

There are powerful tensions and traces inherent in these practices. Going forward in my empirical research I will explore, through interviews and analysis of reflective artefacts, how these tensions play out in a range of educational contexts. My goal is not to criticise students or teachers, or even to make a case that reflective practices should be abolished – that horse has definitely left the stable. Rather, I hope to provide some insight into how

people think about, negotiate and transform these complicated issues in practice. After all, as Youdell reminds us, the trace, or “subordinate discourse” in Foucault’s terms, does yet another piece of work:

A key contribution made to debates concerning the function of the performative is Derrida’s (1988) assertion that any performative is open to misfire and so might fail or do... something unintended or unexpected. And Foucault’s (1990a) account of discourse insists that no discourse is guaranteed—while particular discourses prevail in some contexts and endure over time, the potential for the meanings of these to shift and/or for subordinate discourses to unsettle these remains. (2006, 515)

The high stakes online reflective practices I have discussed in this paper constitute a more demanding and more invasive form of educational practice than what has come before. Here the convergence of surveillance, authentication, assessment and reflection exposes students and teachers to a new intensity of gaze and to increased demands for confession-as-performance. I hope that my research as it progresses will contribute to teachers’ ability to look critically at these practices and make choices which leave space for them, and their students, to subvert and unsettle the prevailing discourses of reflection in digital spaces.

About the author

Jen Ross is a researcher, learning technologist and PhD student in the School of Education at the University of Edinburgh. Her research interests include online reflection, e-portfolios, museums and cultural institutions online, e-learning, higher education, learning technologies, identity and performativity.

Email: jen.ross@ed.ac.uk

References

- Bayne, S. (2005). Deceit, desire and control: the identities of learners and teachers in cyberspace. In R. Land & S. Bayne (Eds.), *Education in Cyberspace*. London: RoutledgeFalmer. Online version at <http://www.malts.ed.ac.uk/staff/sian/desirepaper.htm>
- Bayne, S. (2004). *Learning cultures in cyberspace*. Queen Margaret University College, Edinburgh.
- Belsey, C. (1994). *Desire: love stories in Western culture*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Belsey, C. (2002). *Poststructuralism: A very short introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- boyd, d. (2001). *Faceted Id/entity: managing representation in a digital world*. Cambridge: MIT.
- British Museum. *Changing Face: masks from the British Museum*. retrieved 16 December 2007. <http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/online_tours/museum_and_exhibition/changing_face_masks/changing_face_masks.aspx>.
- Butler, J. (1993). *Bodies that matter*. London: Routledge.
- Clegg, S. (2004). Critical readings: progress files and the production of the autonomous learner. *Teaching in Higher Education* 9(3).
- Curtain, T. (2004). "Promiscuous Fictions". In L.J. Gurak, S. Antonijevic, L. Johnson, C. Ratliff, & J. Reyman (Eds.), *Into the blogosphere: Rhetoric, community, and culture of weblogs*. Retrieved 21 August 2008, from http://blog.lib.umn.edu/blogosphere/promiscuous_fictions.html
- Davies, B. (1997). The subject of post-structuralism: A reply to Alison Jones. *Gender and Education*, 9(3), 271-283.
- Derrida, J. (1997). *Of Grammatology*. Trans: G. Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins.
- Dreyfus, H., & Rabinow, P. (1982). *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*. Padstow: T.J. Press Ltd.
- Eichorn, K. (2008). "Archival Genres: Gathering Texts and Reading Spaces". *Invisible Culture*, issue 12.
- Ewins, R. (2005). "Who are You? Weblogs and Academic Identity". *E-learning*, 2(4).
- Fendler, L. (2003). Teacher Reflection in a Hall of Mirrors: Historical Influences and Political Reverberations. *Educational Researcher*, Vol. 32, No. 3, pp. 16–25.
- Fenwick, 2001. "Questioning the Concept of the Learning Organization" in Paechter, C., Preedy, M., Scott, D., & Soler, J. *Knowledge, power and learning*. London: Paul Chapman Publishing.

- Foucault, M. (1981). *The History of Sexuality: Volume I: An Introduction*. Harmondsworth.
- Foucault, M. (1975). *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison*, New York: Random House.
- Freidrich, B. (2007). *Fictional Blogs: How Digital Narratives are Changing the Way We Read and Write*. Cedar Rapids: Coe College.
- Gilbert, T. (2001). Reflective practice and clinical supervision: meticulous rituals of the confessional. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 36(2), 199-205.
- Goffman, E. (1969). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. London: Allen Lane.
- Gould, E. (2008). "Exposed". New York Times Magazine, electronic version, 25 May 2008. <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/25/magazine/25internet-t.html>
- Haraway, D. (1991), 'A cyborg manifesto: science, technology and socialist feminism in the late twentieth century', in *Simians, cyborgs, and women: the reinvention of nature* London: Free Association Books, pp.149-181.
- Hargreaves, J. (2004). So how do you feel about that? Assessing reflective practice. *Nurse Education Today*, 24, 196-201.
- Hinett, K. (2002). *Developing Reflective Practice in Legal Education*. (Coventry: UK Centre for Legal Education).
- Holbrook, D. (2006). *Theorizing the Diary Weblog*. Chicago: University of Chicago.
- Kreber, C., Klampfleitner, M., McCune, V., Bayne, S., & Knottenbelt, M. (2007). "What Do You Mean By 'Authentic'? A Comparative Review of the Literature on Conceptions of Authenticity in Teaching". *Adult Education Quarterly*, 58(1).
- Kimball, M. (2005). "Database e-portfolio systems: a critical appraisal." *Computers and Composition* vol. 22: 434-458.
- Lair, D. J., Sullivan, K., & Cheney, G. (2005). Marketization and the Recasting of the Professional Self. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 18(3), 307-343.
- Land, R., & Bayne, S. (2002). Screen or monitor? Surveillance and disciplinary power in online learning environments. In C. Rust (Ed.), *Improving student learning using learning technology* (pp. 125-138). Oxford: OCSLD.
- Lemke, T. (2001). 'The birth of bio-politics': Michel Foucault's lecture at the Collège de France on neo-liberal governmentality. *Economy and Society*, 30(2), 190-207.
- McWilliam, E. (2002). Against professional development. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 34(3), 289-300.
- Nota, L., Soresia, S., & Zimmerman, B. J. (2004). Self-regulation and academic achievement and resilience: A longitudinal study. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 41.

Peters, T. (1997). The Brand Called You. *Fast Company*, issue 10.

QAA (2000). Policy statement on a progress file for Higher Education. Quality Assurance Agency web site,
<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/progressFiles/archive/policystatement/default.asp>, retrieved 10 November 2007.

Rein, I., Kotler, P., Hamlin, M. and Stoller, M. (2005). *High Visibility: Transforming Your Personal and Professional Brand*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Scott, S. (2004). "Researching shyness: a contradiction in terms?". *Qualitative Research*, Vol 4, issue 1.

Simon, B. (2005). "The Return of Panopticism: Supervision, Subjection and the New Surveillance". *Surveillance and Society*, 3 (1).

Tosh, D., Light, T. P., Fleming, K., & Haywood, J. (2005). "Engagement with Electronic Portfolios: Challenges from the Student Perspective". *Canadian Journal of Learning and Technology*, 31(3). Retrieved: November 2007.
<http://www.cjlt.ca/content/vol31.3/tosh.html>

Turkle, S. (1997). *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*. London: Phoenix.

Usher, R. and Edwards, R. (1994) *Postmodernism and Education*. London: Routledge.

Yancey, K. B. (2004). "Postmodernism, Palimpsest, and Portfolios: Theoretical Issues in the Representation of Student Work". *College Composition and Communication*, 55(4), 738-761.

Youdell, D. (2006). "Subjectivation and performative politics - Butler thinking Althusser and Foucault: intelligibility, agency and the raced-nationed-religioned subjects of education". *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 27 (4).