Article:

Interconnected Motions

Agency of Information in Culture & Learning (Virtual Mythology)

Philip Devine
Learning Technology Officer (Lecture Capture)
p.devine@keele.ac.uk

Interconnected Motions

Agency of Information in Culture & Learning (Virtual Mythology)

(Philip Devine)

"Design is not engaging with the social, cultural, and ethical implications of the technologies it makes so sexy and consumable."

(Dunne and Raby, 1999, Preface)

Glossary

mooc	Massive open online course.
#edcmooc	Hashtag for e-learning and digital cultures massive online open course Twitter feed,

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to begin to explore and understand the agency and mythology of the objectification of information in culture and learning within the digital domain. Georg Simmel (1910-11) defines the nature of culture as "the cultivation of individuals through the agency of external forms which have been objectified in the course of history". Subjectivity and subjective experience in the objectification of external forms, and the relationship between agency and experiment, in relation to a post-human debate, are, according to Edwards (2010, p. 5), "a separation of matter from meaning, object from subject". These thoughts will provide the necessary semantic tool kit, a "semiotics of virtuality" (Hayles, 1999, p. 24), to begin to understand the importance of the objectification of information in learning and teaching.

Firstly it is necessary to locate a body (or bodies) of information that will allow further definition of agency within the objectification of information in learning and digital culture. The University of Edinburgh's, E-learning and Digital Cultures 2013, Massive Online Open Course (mooc) will (possibly) provide the necessary depth of information to begin to understand the impact of the objectification of information in learning and teaching in digital culture. E-learning and Digital Cultures 2013 mooc Twitter feed, locating messages and conversation around hashtag[1] (#edcmooc), would part provide that necessary, sampled, empirical data. #edcmooc Twitter feed data in CSV[2] format can be found at [Appendix 1]. Ethical consideration regarding privacy of data has been taken into account. All #edcmooc data is in the open domain, and free to access.

---

[1] Hashtag: A searchable object that groups messages and conversations.
[2] CSV: Comma-separated values (CSV) in plain text form.

Agency, Mythology and Representation

To define the concept of agency and mythology, in order to locate the potential efficacy of the objectification of information in learning and digital culture, it is important to map potential 'expected' locations of the objectification of information (object or artifact). It is also important to understand how those objects or artifacts can be, or cannot be represented in the digital domain. To do this, in my opinion, it is important to at least begin to understand the dialectic[3] within learning cultures in the digital domain, described by Edwards (2010, p. 5) as the juxtaposition of "matters of fact/objects and matters of concern/things", with relation to Marinetti's aesthetic of deconstruction (cited in Benjamin, 1935, p. 15). This gives rise to heightened subjective experience in digital cultures, and leads to the problematic relationship between object and subject, extending Simmel's (1910-11) understanding of nature as being represented by the way our intellect assembles and orders sense perceptions (physico psychical organisation). Simmel's (1910-11) widening of the Kantian worldview (thought experiment) introduces the concept of 'rejection', in that objects reject representation because "coherences, regularities, appear as subjective, as that which is brought to the situation by ourselves, in contrast with that which we have received from the externally existent". In light of Simmel's understanding of nature, I would like to go on to suggest that the agency and 'mythology' of an artifact (or object) is not delivered by representation, but is delivered by experiment, assemblies, orderings and sense perceptions, described by Haraway (1985, p. 84; 2007, p. 57) as "powerful infidel heteroglossia". This is perpetuated by the relationship between the apparent and the existent, Berger (2010, p. 9) telling us that "appearances are volatile" and that "technological innovation has made it easy to separate the apparent from the existent" indicating that the "system in which we now live has a mythology". Berger extends Walter Benjamin's 'pre-world war two' worldview, as set out in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (Benjamin, 1935).

To understand the nature (and abilities) of agency in relation to the objectification of information in culture and learning, it is necessary to further investigate the notion of representation, with the understanding that objects reject representation (Simmel, 1910-11). I define representation as "a hypothetical internal cognitive symbol representing reality" [appendix, 2] that can be shared among members of a group or community. I now introduce the notion of mythology into my argument, defined as "idealised experience to establish behavioural models" [appendix, 3].

---

[3] Dialectic: A process of change in which a concept, or its realisation, passes over into, and is preserved and fulfilled by its opposite.

I can then suggest that what I am looking for, the agency of the objectification of information, exists in established behavioural models (or patterns) within, in this case, empirical data that may deliver 'idealised experience', or what Pedersen (2010, p. 243) describes as a "preoccupation with the project of the human". I understand that through 'experience' it is possible for objectification of information to mean many 'things' to many people, defined by Sheller and Urry (2005, p. 222) as "flickering combinations of presence and absence of peoples". The portrayal of idealised experience that hopes to result in established behavioural models is not new; far from it. Early cultural artifacts to contemporary religious icons, or early forms of product (brand) advertising, to digital artifacts gone viral, all, I would suggest, attempt to deliver a mythology of a type. What is new is the social acquisition of media in the digital domain, in which populations in general appear to continue the apparent human condition of mythification of human experience (for one purpose or another). This is described by Berger (2010, p. 12) as living "within a spectacle of empty clothes and unworn masks".

Cultivation, Icon and Iconography

In light of my understanding of agency, mythology and representation, how is the objectification of information on culture and learning made apparent in practice, and what are the abilities and effects of the agency objectification of information on culture and learning? I would suggest that the notions of agency in this instance are legion. It is hoped that #edcmooc data will uncover less obvious representations of idealised experience that influence digital education.

So, to begin what would be a more substantial study, beyond the remit of this paper, I would like to share my thoughts on #edcmooc participants' representation of lecturer within the #edcmooc digital environment, and locate evidence of that representation in learning within #edcmooc data [Appendix 1].
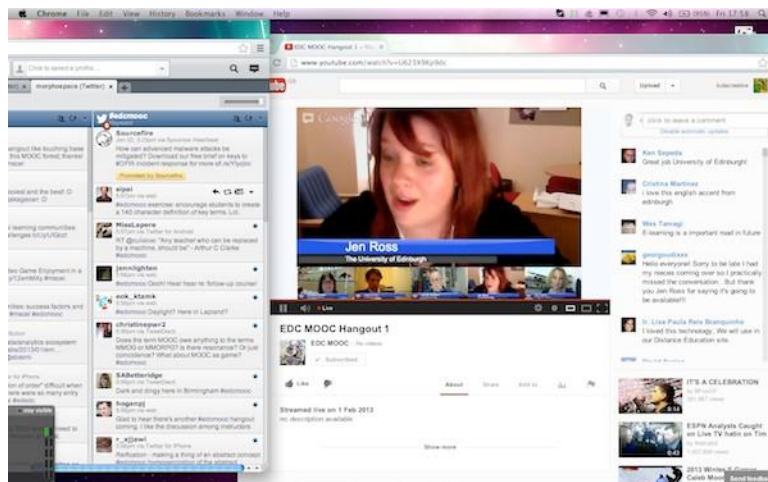
1. #edcmooc Hangout, 01.02.13, 17:00 pm - 18:00 pm   2. Ohrid Annunciation Icon

The images above are a juxtaposition of objectification in the service of the cultivation of individuals. The first is taken from the initial edcmooc Google hangout; the second, a Christian artifact created in the first quarter of the 14th century. My interest in this juxtaposition of image is in how the massification of audience in educational experience represents lecturer (or educator) as an arbiter or source of knowledge. Resulting from objectification, the artifact or object is becoming iconic, if only fleetingly, a representation of idealised experience.

7

Below is a micro sample of #edcmooc participants' 'tweet' comments that objectify the hypothetical internal cognitive symbol of the educator, as evidence of idealised experience.

"Watching live Hangout with **profs** in #EDCMOOC" "The #edcmooc is really fantastic. Terrific to hear all the **profs**, read the live-tweeting, see the highlighted content. http://t.co/NSpu5vf2!" "**RT** @adarel: The #edcmooc is really fantastic. Terrific to hear all the **profs**, read the live-tweeting, see the highlighted content. http: ..." "@cibliste me too - hearing from 'the #edcmooc **profs'** in real time really helps me lots :)" "Hearing from the **profs** is a great way to wrap up week 1! Loving it. #edcmooc" "Appreciate all 5 of **profs** in #EDCMOOC doing Hangout ... Interesting example of "**"teaching presence"**" w 40K students" "Agree! **RT** @bwatwood: Appreciate all 5 of **profs** in #EDCMOOC doing Hangout ... Interesting example of ""teaching presence"" w 40K students" "**RT** @flittleton: Agree! RT @bwatwood: Appreciate all 5 of **profs** in #EDCMOOC doing Hangout ... Interesting example of ""teaching presence"" ..." "RT @christinepwr2: RT @bwatwood: Appreciate **all 5 of profs** in #EDCMOOC doing Hangout ... Interesting example of ""**teaching presence**"" w 40 ..." **(B)** "I think this #edcmooc hangout really conveys the **personality of the profs** & makes the course more fun & engaging than ppt-style teaching" "#edcmooc Thankyou Sian, Christine, Jeremy, Hamish, Jen! Now I truly feel I have shared a class with thousands listening eagerly to **our profs**" **(A)** "#edcmooc Thank you so much **profs** very well done! **It enhances motivation! motivation**"

(#edcmooc Twitter comment sample, 01.02.13, time period 17:00 to 18:00)

The twitter comments above represent an objectification of information in human experience (hypothetical idealised human experience) in learning culture. The culture and cultivation of #edcmooc participants is gained through experience of the agency of external forms (objects) as defined by Simmel (1910-11). I have highlighted in bold specific words in comments, that represent, in my opinion, subjective 'experience' which I would suggest hint at 'idealised experience' and the possible presence of a Mythology; an individual's attempt at "control strategies" to "define boundaries" that are not based on the "integrity of natural objects" (Haraway, 2007, p 44). For instance the word 'profs' (as an example) gains traction throughout the twitter conversation, yet I understand that no Professors were present during the time period identified... possibly reflecting Berger's point of view, that "we live within a spectacle of empty clothes and unworn masks" and thus defining a possible "virtual mythology". Does the word 'Profs' denote an elevation of the objectification of information, through heightened sense perceptions

in the massification of education, indicating "that reality is never present to us as such; rather, our sense perceptions are self-organising processes that construct the world we know from the unmediated flux, unknowable in itself" (Hayles 2001, p. 145)? If so, this gives credibility to the notion that the objectification of information within the digital domain is being raised to the status of icon, with relation to iconography; iconography being the interpretation of image (or object). If I accept this argument I can begin to understand a notion of 'idealised experience' located in an objectification of information within the digital domain as 'agency', as suggested by tweet comment (A) "#edcmooc Thank you so much profs very well done! It enhances motivation! motivation", and Tweet comment (B) "I think this #edcmooc hangout really conveys the personality of the profs & makes the course more fun & engaging than ppt-style teaching".

This interesting (possibly challenging) interpretation of the agency of information in culture and learning, especially with relation to icon and iconography, may I believe, help to uncover the potential of digital education and enhance student learning experience. Iconic experience is guided by metaphor, with Lakoff and Johnson (1980) arguing that "speech, thoughts and actions are based upon metaphors" and that "we only understand reality through metaphor" (cited in Johnson, 2009). Hayles (2001, p. 144) supports this, stating that "Metaphor performs essential functions in orienting and guiding thought; it connects abstraction and embodiment". This connects ideas and objects, making notion concrete. If heightened sense perception is located in idealised experience in the digital domain, resulting in more motivated, and inspired students, the notion of 'virtual mythology' may be able to be designed into the learning experience. I can then ask the question, how would a 'virtual mythology' become apparent in digital education? My discussion to this point, has in part, set out a theoretical argument to support a pedagogy for virtual mythology, helped by the identification of idealised experience in digital phenomena (#edcmooc), thus leaving my argument, to now describe a practical interpretation of pedagogy in virtual mythology for digital education.

Note: It is beyond the practical remit of this paper to fully document and describe pedagogy in Virtual Mythology, but it is possible for this paper to begin to sketch out and propose a direction of travel.

What is key to pedagogy in virtual mythology? I would suggest that what is key is an "idealised experience to establish in behavioural models" in pedagogy, enhanced by what Urry and Sheller define as "sorting systems" a creativity that is found in the re-ordering of a sequential ordering of thought. It is clear that the educator, whether lecturer, librarian, technologist etc., is, in part, responsible for developing those pedagogical experiential phenomena in the digital domain, and the critical design of

9

aesthetic experience in 'Interconnected Motions' (Dunne and Raby, 2005). This indicates that the logo of educator, embedded within the logo of the institution, anchors cohort learning and teaching, and begins to map pedagogy, curriculum, learning and teaching, and (hypothetically) behavioural models. If I accept that logo, related to icon and iconography, can be designed to extend the presence of the educator (which in distance learning is a much needed progression), and pursue an educator's idealised cohort learning outcomes. I can then see no reason why an educator's logo/icon (knowledge, passions and personalities) cannot be acquired as representation of learning objects (information) to guide student subjective experience of learning objects, towards expected learning outcomes, and beyond. Cultivation of individuals, and idealised experience, in icon and iconography very much relates to an enlightenment of a sort, a religious enlightenment, a pathway, guidance or teachings that transcend matter (Pederson, 2010; Edwards, 2010). I would suggest that the agency of objectification of information in the digital domain (in the service of learning and teaching) resides in these same properties, properties that separate matter from meaning, and enhance meaning to identify potential in the student and connectivity of subjective (idealised) experience. That subjective experience may be located within the objectification of information in the digital domain, or the intellect of the individual, both in real terms being the same, an objectification of information. This increases the potential for experimentation in critical thinking (physico psychical organisation) that relates to the rejection of representation by objects in the service of the creation of new ideas made concrete in objects.

Conclusion

This aim of this paper has been to begin to explore, and uncover evidence of agency and mythology in the objectification of information in culture and learning within the digital domain, relating to "Cognisphere" (Hayles, 2006). I have explored the nature of the objectification of information, theoretically, through the writings of Hayles, Simmel, Berger, Edwards, Dunne and Raby, etc., and practically by an (minimal) interrogation of empirical data taken from #edcmooc Twitter feed (01.02.13, time period 17:00 to 18:00). In conclusion I would suggest that this 'minimal' investigation warrants further attention, and that agency in the objectification of information to enhance pedagogy in digital education, lies (in part) in a critical design of idealised (aesthetic) experience in 'Interconnected Motions' (Dunne and Raby, 2005). This creates a virtual mythology that could be seen to perpetuate idealised experience, possibly resulting in 'Theta State', where Theta State is identified as the gateway to learning and memory.

Reference

Edwards, R. (2010). The end of lifelong learning: A post human condition? Studies in the Education of Adults, vol 42, no 1, 5 17.

Geog Simmel. (1910-11). How is Society Possible?, American Journal of Sociology, vol. 16.

Pedersen, H. (2010). Is the posthuman educable? On the convergence of educational philosophy, animal studies, and posthumanist theory. Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education, vol 31, no 2, 237 250.

Berger J (2012). The shape of a pocket. 5th ed. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group: ISBN 0375718885, 9780375718885.

Dunne and Raby. (1999, 2005). Hertzian Tales: Electronic Products, Aesthetic Experience, and Critical Design, The MIT Press.

Hayles, N.K. (2001). Desiring Agency: Limiting Metaphors and Enabling Constraints in Dawkins and Deleuze/Guattari.

Hayles, N.K. (1999). Toward embodied virtuality, chapter 1 of How we became posthuman: virtual bodies in cybernetics, literature and informatics. Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

Hayles, N.K. (2006). Unfinished Work: From Cyborg to Cognisphere. *Theory Culture Society*, 23/7-8.

Johnston, R. (2009). Salvation or destruction: metaphors of the internet. First Monday, 14(4), [online]. Available at: <http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/ view/2370/2158>. [Accessed 17 March 2005].

Haraway, D. (1985, 2007). A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late 20th Century. in D Bell and A Kennedy, *The Cybercultures Reader.* Routledge.

Sheller M. Urry J. (2006). "The new mobilities paradigm" Environment and Planning A 38(2) 207 – 226.

Benjamin J. (1935). The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction. Originally published in Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung.

Appendix

1. CSV data can be found at: http://www.kulacreative.co.uk/ededc/edcmooc.csv.

2. Definition of Representation: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Representation

3. Definition of Mythology: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mythology