Approaches to Technology in Australia

- Introduction:

Vocational Imperative vs. Responsible Education transfer of "just-in-time knowledge" versus a broad education

How do we stretch a vision between the Futurist narratives of progress with all their techno-optimism and the technophobia often encountered in more traditional cultural theorists? What can we do about anti-intellectualism and boredom in the undergraduate classroom? Concrete examples of useful assignments and ways in which to teach theory or tech (ie. How could the role plays proposed by Augusto Boal's "Games for Actors and Non-actors" be applied to the teaching theatre?)

About Lisa Gye (Australia):

Lisa Gye teaches new media theory and production at Swinburne University of Technology (Victoria, Australia).

http://www.swin.edu.au/sbs/media/staff/gye/

http://halflives.adc.rmit.edu.au/

SwinMC
http://www.swinmc.net/

in Speaker Series | this section only

COMMENTS

On Situated Media Criticism, Personalized Education and the Organized Network Model

Interview Lisa Gye (adjusted by Trebor Scholz)
As part of WebCamTalk1.0
http://www.newmediaeducation.org

Trebor Scholz: What do you think could be the best entry point for students into new media art?

Lisa Gye: Teaching here in Melbourne (Australia) I am engaged in electronic writing, which is a good way to open up students to new media practices. My interest in this field goes back to Gregory L. Ulmer. His books "Teletheory: Grammatology in the Age of Video" and "Heuretics: The Logic of Invention" have strongly influenced my pedagogical practices. His work made me realize that electronic writing has the potential to challenge our own subjectivity and thus change the way we create knowledge. For the past 12 years I taught new media and my goal has always been to think about the way writing shapes our consciousness. A tool is just a tool. What counts are larger issues of human subjectivity. I do not think that we fathom the full impact that digital literacy will have on the creation and dissemination of knowledge. Ulmer calls this digital literacy--
I mostly used outside university resources for teaching and to do my own work. I avoided programs like the corporatized Blackboard system with its virtual drop boxes. These systems did not even begin to accommodate the projects that I have worked on with my students. Security concerns are among the reasons of the university to limit full and unregulated access to their network, which in turn makes it hard for faculty and students to do inventive work. But we routed around these problems. Systems like Blackboard are dangerous because they reinforce the idea of students coming to the university in order to consume an education. It gives them the idea that they can enter the discursive space of the lecture by downloading the transcript of a presentation.

In Australia there is a strong trend towards the personalization of education. This very noticeable movement creates the sense in students that they pay to get whatever it is they think they need to know. This contradicts the very idea of education. Material about 15th century rhetoric may not have immediate and obvious relevance to students' day to day lives but it can teach them about the current moment. Students often reject this kind of historical material in advance of understanding it. This increasingly prevalent attitude is, I think, caused in part by corporate educational models. This question of 'personal relevance' is so tied to the consumerist ethic that it prevents students' minds from being open to a wide range of ideas and practices.

Of course, all of this is tied to the promotion of certain ideas about freedom and choice that have currency in both Australia and elsewhere. Education is now supposed to be a smorgasbord of choice and students should be free to choose to study whatever they like. But freedom and choice are complex ideas that are rarely contested and often used as slogans. I would really love to see a public discussion of what exactly freedom and choice mean in the context of education.

TS: Today's cooperative technologies allow for enormous social filtering and connect people who share a very particular interest. Pro-anorexia and cutting blogs, for example, are known phenomena. The reason for this distributed personalization of interest can be found in information overload. Input from anything outside of the private world of the immediate social group of the student is excluded. Nothing that disturbs their vision, their sense of self is let in, thus limiting the student's ability to learn. This problem can also be linked to a drastic increase of work load since the 1960s. This widely perceived lack of openness may be a response to this...
widely perceived lack or openness may be a response to this 'dataobesity' and rather call for anti-social software. We could also relate the decreasing student interest in public lectures. From Stanford University to Sarah Lawrence College, lectures by nationally acclaimed authors or artists draw no more than a handful of students. In response, such public lectures have increasingly been integrated into classes to secure an audience. Maybe we should re-think the lecture model altogether.

http://www.livejournal.com/community/proanorexia/
http://www.geekculture.com/joyoftech/joyarchives/529.html

LG: There is a desperate need for students to reconnect to campus life. Coming to university is not just about consuming courses so that you can graduate into a good job. The development of social networks in universities is, I think, being undermined by the corporatization of university life. Our government's current attempts to make student unionism voluntary will just compound this problem. Student unions provide, at the moment, the only social outlet for students on campus. Making them voluntary assures their demise. In response to this we decided to create a virtual network between all of our Media and Communications students. We hope that students will connect online and then meet in person. The site for this network is called SwinMC and was developed by a group of postgraduate media students in the form of a tiki wiki.

http://www.swinmc.net/
http://tikiwiki.org/

Every undergraduate student that starts in Media and Communications gets access to this tool but the results in terms of participation are sparse. We need to look at ways in which we can involve students. We say-- here is this space- do whatever you want with it. It is a hard sell. One idea is to make the tool part of the curriculum but that creates an assessment-based relationship of students to the tool. So, how do you socialize an online tool? How do you draw people into a social space? At the moment, these are problems that we are working on. I know we are not alone in this- there are many fantastic initiatives that provide access to social computing technologies for students in Australia and around the world. This question of student participation, and the use of available resources is an agenda for new media educators worldwide.

TS: This question of people's motivation to contribute to the public came up often over the past few years. What triggers participation? What does the browsing public really want?

LG: I prefer mailing lists to weblogs as I think that mailing lists force you to interact with people with whom you do not want to interact. This, for me, is the definition of social. To be social means to negotiate social spaces. This is so important for our students. There is no doubt that social software can facilitate and extend the kinds of spaces that students inhabit but I still do not feel that they can substitute for actual face to face interaction.
TS: In response to many of these issues a group of educators across Australia founded Fibreculture. What is its goal and how does it differ from other initiatives?

http://fibreculture.org

LG: Fibreculture was founded by Geert Lovink and David Teh in 2001. While there were many other online resources for discussions of network theory, like nettime, there was no forum that was specific to the Australian cultural context. What does it mean to live in a country of 22 million people that is a 24 hour flight away from the major centers in Europe and North America? Most of the texts that we read come from the U.S. and from Europe. There are strong, valuable Australian voices and Fibreculture provides a forum, an outlet, for those voices. Australia has a unique relationship to the rest of the developed world. We have a British colonial heritage, but are also still colonized by American culture. We need theory that reflects that specificity.

Fibreculture satisfies the need we have for situated conversations about the way the media impacts us here. We experience a certain tyranny of distance that is also reflected in the way knowledge is constructed. Cooperative technologies/ social software, for example, is taken up in Australia at a much faster pace than anywhere else in the world. These technologies can bridge the geographic distance. Fibreculture has been successful-- there are currently over 900 subscribers to its mailing list. We have published several newspapers and a FibreCulture Reader-- all peer-reviewed by the mailing list. Also out of the mailing list grew a new media education resource site.

http://fibreculture.org/newmediaed/index.html

In addition, we started Fibreculture Journal, which is an open access, peer-reviewed, scholarly journal dealing with issues in media culture. The 4th issue is coming up and another 5 are planned for this year. There was a sense that there were fewer and fewer places for academics to publish work and yet so much of our job relies on being public.

http://journal.fibreculture.org/

We organized four conferences on the East Coast of Australia so far. The success of these events reinforces my belief in the value of face-to-face conversations.

http://fibreculture.org/events.html

TS: There is much debate about the emergence of cultural networks as frameworks for action. But what do you specifically mean when you describe Fibreculture as an organized network?

http://www.open-organizations.org/
http://polaris.gseis.ucla.edu/pagre/network.html#section4
http://www.press.umich.edu/titleDetailDesc.do?id=114847
LG: Last year at a conference we work on the difficult definition of Fibreculture as an organized network. Fibreculture has facilitators who organize conferences, bring in list members to develop initiatives, publish other media and, facilitate discussion on the list. But non-facilitators are also vital to Fibreculture-- they are in fact what makes Fibreculture.

The Fibreculture Journal is run by Andrew Murphie who is not a facilitator. But he tends to run decisions by the facilitators. The facilitators are often those who volunteer for tasks that need to get done.

People often assume networks to be by default democratic. I do not agree. I would compare the functioning of an organized network to that of criminal networks. Criminal networks are not just set up for the sake of its existence but in order to get something done. In order for organized networks to be functional there needs to be a hierarchy, they are an inevitable function of networks. This does not sit well with a lot of popular rhetoric.

Fibreculture also strives to remain independent. It does not want to be affiliated with any university or the government. But in order to put together a conference we need money and a legal entity to receive these funds. Fibreculture so far runs more like a criminal entity-- we use cash. Consequently, we open ourselves up to allegations of corruption and of being undemocratic. The question of how organized networks intersect with other networks and institutions needs to be negotiated. I hope that Fibreculture does not need to get institutionalized merely for financial or administrative reasons because I think this would undermine its independence.

Most Fibreculture members are already attached to institutions. There is no need for them to belong to yet another institution. What are possibilities of action outside of organizational structures? The Australian government has recently established a fund for research networks. Ten years ago that would have been unthinkable. In the past, a handful of established Australian scholars would have received the funding over and over. Now, the government, starts to offer some funding for collaborative networked research efforts. But Fibreculture explores structures outside the institutional to framework because this is the way we will remain effective. The future will show how this will play out.

Resources on organized networks:


Lovink, Geert and Schneider, Florian, 'A Virtual World is Possible: From Tactical Media to Digital Multitudes', posting to nettime mailing list, 1 November, 2002. http://www.nettime.org

Criminal networks by Vincent Lemieux, Royal Canadian Mounted


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http://www.swin.edu.au/sbs/media/staff/gye/
http://www.swin.edu.au/sbs/media/appliedmedia/