11 Digital English – me, online, writing & academia

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Abstract

This case study reports on the Digital English project, an experimental course in academic writing piloted with international students on a year-long pre-sessional programme. Inspired by Ulmer's (2003) *Mystory* project and Gauntlett's (2007) *Lego* research, the course concerns itself with the students' exploration of self at a sensitive time of transition across geographical, educational and cultural borders. To facilitate the journey, the project blended learning spaces (online and offline), literacies (home-based and academic) and modes (visual and verbal). As the culmination of their engagement with the themes such as digital literacy, visual culture and hypermedia, the learners created a visual artefact to tell their subjective self-story. This provided a stimulus for a more objective investigation conducted by peers. The analysis of the final multimodal displays showed that students tend to portray themselves as social beings, yet with individualistic goals in regard to their academic and professional success. In the project evaluation, the students described their learning experience as an enriching challenge, which tentatively shows that there is room for visuality, creativity and identity work in at least certain academic contexts.

Keywords: identity, visuality, creativity, digital literacy, academic development.

1.   Context/rationale

The *Digital English* project is an experimental writing course intending to facilitate the development of academic attributes such as creativity, critical thinking and reflection skills as presented in the *Matrix* devised by the University of Glasgow[1]. The course was trialled with international students preparing for a post-graduate study at a British university. The leading theme is self-exploration accompanied by examination of digital literacy, visual metaphors and crossovers between academic and home-oriented genres. The rationale for designing and offering such a course was twofold. Firstly, international students constitute almost one fifth of the total UK student body, with the Chinese student population having increased by 6% in 2012/13 (HESA, 2013). Apart from crossing the geographical borders, these students have to make a rapid transition in other domains too, including language and academic culture. The acceptable language competency level has been capped at 6.5 on the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) scale, which in terms of writing translates into an ability to write a range of texts of some complexity on various subjects, including abstract ones. This constitutes a challenging leap for many of the pre-sessional students who at the time of entry present 5-5.5 scores in writing and feel just comfortable enough to produce straightforward texts on familiar topics.

Settling into a new academic culture poses extra requirements in terms of skills and personal qualities such as independent and critical thinking. These refer to research and study *per se* but also, as transferable skills, to the application of creative, imaginative and innovative thinking to problem-solving processes. Some of the current approaches to writing might be suppressing creativity and innovation, and expository papers are likely to be interpreted by students as requests to regurgitate library knowledge. This can present a challenge for a learner with a language competency as described above, and complicated further by habits typical of their original academic culture. For example, Chinese students display a propensity to include narration or appeal to tradition in an effort to enliven their discourse. As a result, they may experience tension when

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1. The University of Glasgow compiled a list of academic abilities, personal qualities and transferable skills which the students have the chance to acquire and develop during their studies http://www.gla.ac.uk/media/media_183776_en.pdf.

faced with British university writing conventions as they feel forced to give up on their original ideas. I am not advocating leniency in this respect but, through the project, suggest a different approach which embraces the students' needs, experiences and voices and so, hopefully, eases them into Western ways of thinking and writing.

The way in which the *Digital English* project respects the students' cultural histories and complex subject positions is through asking them to reflect on those subjectivities. This is achieved by harnessing visuality, digital hypermedia and multimodality, a second leitmotif of the project. *Digital English* draws on Gauntlett's (2007) *Lego* research and Ulmer's (2003) *Mystory* project. The former concerns itself with an exploration of identity through play with building blocks and discovers that certain subjectivities are more easily expressed using the visual-spatial logic than through language. The latter exploits the internet as a medium that "puts us in a new relation to writing" (Ulmer, 2003, p. 2), both as writers and readers. This means the traditional notion of literacy does not suffice and has to be expanded to include new strategies such as linkage, collage, juxtaposition and image reasoning. Imagistic and hypertextual writing orients the student toward interrelations, overlaps and recursive patterns, which introduces creativity into learning (Csikszentmihalyi, 1993; Ulmer, 2003). This is possible because visual syntax follows a different logic aligned with relationality and synchronicity. This way it allows unexpected conceptual links to be forged while a conventionally structured text imposes processing information in a linear, sequential fashion, which may prevent the unexpected from surfacing. Engagement with digital hypermedia as well as the associative and lateral logic of creative thinking might help students become active, responsible and critical consumers and producers of information and knowledge.

2.   Aims and objectives

The experimental course focuses on issues of digital literacy, with the particular attention to the visual turn, and attempts to harness the learner's creativity by asking them to produce their own self-story, following the premise that the

unexamined life is not worth living. This digital artefact was then embedded into a collectively written report. While the former allowed the student to experiment with visual metaphors to express highly subjective notions, the latter was more academically oriented and required the students to take on a role of a detached researcher. Interweaving home- and university-based genres and discourses intended to assist the student in making a transition between cultures as well as language competencies characteristic for each of the contexts and discussed in the previous section. Adding an interpretative layer of an academic commentary also attempted to explore the value of creativity and visuality for academic development. Achieving the main goal was aligned with a number of process-oriented aims, such as:

- facilitating reflection on identity and subjectivity in order to gain a better understanding of one's self in the context of academic study and the related cross-linguistic and -cultural transitions;

- raising a general awareness of digital literacy with a particular focus on visual metaphors, linkage, multimodality as well as privacy, online persona and copyright;

- developing evaluation and reflection skills through assessing the implications of self-awareness and digital literacy for learning, particularly in a higher education context;

- developing practical skills in the use of digital tools, e.g. photo editors, web search engines, Creative Commons licences, Google Docs, wikis, hyperlinks, blogs, and zooming presentation software.

3.   What I did

The course was delivered in a blended mode at the University of Glasgow Language Centre to a group of 14 international students preparing for a post-graduate study. The group consisted of Chinese and Middle-Eastern students

with IELTS scores of 5.5-6 in writing. We met twice a week in a computer lab over the period of 10 weeks. During the 1.5-hour sessions the students were introduced to the main concepts of the course through reading/listening tasks, followed by individual and collaborative research and writing activities as well as guided group discussions.

Figure 1.   Digital English wiki homepage

During the face-to-face sessions, they were also introduced to the main web tools and provided with numerous practice opportunities so that they felt sufficiently comfortable to use them unassisted at home. The main hub was a wiki[1] (Figure 1) which outlined all the activities and provided links to core and further resources. Each student set up a Gmail account to use for the project purposes. This was dictated by convenience as Gmail can easily be linked to Blogger and Google Docs, the other two tools extensively used throughout the course. The blogs were used for reflection and submission of individual tasks. Their content was fed to the wiki via RSS to aggregate all the student work and make it easier to read and comment on postings. The Google Docs were used for

1. The wiki can be accessed here: http://digitalenglish-mystory.wikispaces.com/

collaboration, for example to work on documents in groups either as authors or commentators.

The course was organised into four sections, reflecting Csikszentmihalyi's (1993) idea of a 5-stage 'creativity flow' process. Each stage included a sequence of in-class and homework tasks that directly or indirectly linked to the main project outcomes (the time frames given in brackets refer to initially planned timings).

3.1.   Preparation (week 1)

In this climate-setting week the students approached the main theme of self through listening to an artist's informal reflection and an academic lecture on identity. They set up a Google account, which allowed them to start a blog. They were introduced to photo search engines and Creative Commons in order to locate visual metaphors representing their actual/imagined/desired subjectivity, which assisted them in the preliminary reflection on their identity. The next step entailed linking the reflection with an exploration of graduate attributes. This helped them establish personal goals for the duration of the course.

3.2.   Incubation (weeks 2-4)

In this exploratory phase the students worked more closely with the course main themes of identity, creativity and visual culture as well as techniques of hypertext and image collages. They collaborated on transforming a quasi-biographical text into a hypertext, an exercise in annotation, linkage and content visualisation. Constructing the hypertext required greater engagement with the themes and a more in-depth analysis. Additionally, they benefitted from working in groups as well as having to think critically by providing constructive feedback via comments on the other group's hypertext. Subsequently, through working with Gauntlett's (2007) ideas stemming from the *Lego* research, the students examined the issues of visuality and their potential usefulness in connecting ideas and creating new understandings of their selves. As a personalised follow-up, each learner created their own identity visualisation in the form of either an interactive image collage

(using Thinglink) or a Prezi presentation, with written captions or a voiceover respectively. The artefact created this way constituted a multimodal record of the students' inner voice elaborating on their subjective understanding of their professional, cultural, familial and academic circumstances.

3.3.   Elaboration and evaluation (weeks 5-9)

The students were divided into small groups and allocated 2-3 digital artefacts constructed by their classmates. Their task was to develop a more objective and stylistically more formal analysis to problematise the student's everyday experience based on the background research. The final story-within-story was expected to be a hypertext, using hyperlinks, visuals and texts and so becoming an amalgam of not only the student's subjectivities but also modes and styles. However, this task proved ambitious and in the end, the students produced a written report analysing and interpreting their peers' visuals with references to existing research such as Gauntlett's (2007) *Lego* study mentioned earlier. The end result was a multimodal display blending the private and the academic in terms of content, genres, styles and modes.

3.4.   Reflection (week 10)

The students presented the displays to a wider student body as well as a group of tutors during a mingling event. They also reflected on their engagement in the creative process throughout the course by filling in a questionnaire and completing a final reflective blog post.

4.   Discussion

The design of *Digital English* aspires to have roots in a blend of cognitivism and critical pedagogy. The in-depth and creative exploration of own subjectivity, which consistently requires the students to map out the links between the familiar and the unfamiliar by embedding the visual artefact in an academic enquiry, is in line with cognitivism principles (Shor, 1993). So is the inclusion of

regular reflective blog entries – the students were asked, for example, to reflect on academic attributes such as creativity, dedication to innovation and criticality or on the role of visual culture in academia. The reflections often aimed to engage the students in a metadata analysis, leading them to become more self-aware and -directed learners. As a tutor, I tried to act as a question- and problem-poser as well as a provider of formative feedback to facilitate the self-regulation processes.

Apart from strengthening thinking skills, the course initiated the development of critical consciousness in the students so that they become more self-organised, self-educated and critically literate. This goal could largely be achieved by undertaking the task of presenting a visual testimony of oneself and having it elaborated on by peers through references to academic sources. Through this inquiry into their selves I hoped the students would recognise and possibly challenge myths, values and language that may be underlying their behaviours and actions through dialogues in class or on the blogs. The main findings from the analyses performed by the student researchers showed that the students tend to portray themselves as social beings, entangled in networks and shaped by relationships, in line with Gauntlett's (2007) research. Simultaneously, there is a degree of self-determination represented by frequent references to setting and achieving personal goals. Interestingly, the students did not evade articulating less positive points in their identity construction and so they often alluded to their doubts and concerns regarding their personal life and academic development. The analysis also revealed and so drew attention to the cultural differences in values. For instance, it was interesting to see how the students discovered and made sense of diverse perceptions of family patterns or gender roles existing in their peers' cultures, which potentially made a useful contribution to developing a cross-cultural awareness among the students, a crucial competency in the globalised academia.

Throughout the course, the students actively engaged in the process of learning, also in a sense of having a direct influence on the ongoing activities. The learning spaces, both online and offline, were organised in such a way that they aimed to be:

- participatory – students initiated and maintained dialogic blogs;

- situated – contextualisation prominently featured in the course activities;

- critical – self and social reflection was prioritised;

- democratic – the students were engaged in indirect evaluation of the course syllabus through their blog reflections and in-class discussions; materials and activities were often adapted 'on the go' as an immediate response to the students' needs and interests; questioning was encouraged and opposing opinions were dealt with sensitively; for instance, when an engineering student doubted merits of analysing art-oriented reflections for academic development we discussed opportunities for transferral of such knowledge and skills;

- dialogic – the students were asked to recast their experience in their own words and through images;

- desocialised from passivity – the instructions were often deliberately left open, the models were provided only occasionally and it was constantly stressed that independence and creativity are favoured over simple replication;

- research-oriented – the research was undertaken by both the students and the tutor, the latter for example with a view of providing appropriate and informed feedback.

All these elements are highly reminiscent of the socially critical approach (Shor, 1993).

As regards the evaluation of the pedagogical usefulness of the project, interviews with students as well as the final feedback survey showed that overall the course succeeded in meeting the learning outcomes and stimulating the students' self-awareness. Each of the participants might have developed it

to a different degree and in different direction, being it in a personal or more academic sphere of their life. They particularly welcomed the development of digital literacy, a positive finding as a brief questionnaire on technology use at the beginning of the course showed a varied use of social web tools among this particular cohort. In their feedback, the students commented on their heightened sense of ownership and responsibility for their online space and expressed appreciation of being able to connect to and have a dialogue with peers and experts. At the same time, some of them voiced concerns over privacy and data protection as well as the netiquette of commenting on others' work. They noticed benefits of the web for academic and social development, including greater opportunities for social inclusion and integration into the Western society. In terms of more personalised academic gains, one would-be social science student appreciated familiarisation with visual methodologies to conduct richer and more in-depth analyses of research subjects. Generally, the students were able to see the applicability of the skills developed during the project in the further study. As one of them put it, the project showed them how to think 'out of the box', which demonstrated a growing awareness of critical thinking, acknowledging multiple perspectives and nurturing curiosity and open mind when researching a given topic.

5.   Conclusion

Overall, the students considered participation in the *Digital English* project a useful and enjoyable exercise – 'a happy learning process' to use a quote from one of them – worth recommending to their peers. It was a useful experience for me, too. Initially I had been concerned that there might be little appreciation of more creativity- and visuality-oriented teaching approaches to development of academic skills and attributes. I was very tentative in introducing the idea to the students but their response convinced me that the project is worth pursuing and developing further. I hope that sharing the idea through this case study opens up a discussion about the place and value of visuality, creativity and identity work in academia, in at least some contexts, as well as provides the teaching community with ideas of possible multimodal pedagogical activities.

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