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# **From learner to prosumer: Interactions between art and literature from a connectivist perspective.**

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**From learner to prosumer: interactions between art and literature from a connectivist  
perspective. (A Room of One's Own Presentation)**

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**Abstract**

Nowadays, there is widespread agreement in our country that ICTs need to play a key role in education, but it remains to be seen whether they will be effective in improving the quality of learning. This article reviews recommendations for teacher education in this field, and examines the potential of SNSs (social network sites) to meet such requirements. It draws on the implementation of a SNS in Literature classes to illustrate how this environment can contribute to the creation of content which moves beyond the purely textual, to the construction of collective knowledge, and to student empowerment in general.

**From learner to prosumer: interactions between art and literature from a connectivist  
perspective.**

Nowadays, there is widespread agreement in our country that ICTs need to play a key role in education to cater for the needs of the information society, the global economy and the labour market, which means the education of teachers-to-be should equip them to introduce them in their classrooms (Landau 2002). A number of measures have been taken to enhance the technological infrastructure of Higher Education institutions, but it remains to be seen whether they will be effective in improving the quality of learning.

Cobo Romani (2009) reviews the findings of a number of studies carried out mainly in the European Union regarding the impact of access and use of ICTs on students' learning, especially in primary and lower secondary education. Some of his conclusions are:

- ✓ there is no correlation between the level of ICT access and the percentage of ICT use;
- ✓ the frequency of ICT use among students does not determine their academic performance;
- ✓ the impact on education and training has not been as great as expected;
- ✓ there is a lack of coordination between the adoption of technology in the classroom and the embracing of flexible and innovative teaching-learning strategies,

which leads him to state that the need today is for "*educators who are able to create, connect, enrich and transfer knowledge among people*". He goes on to characterise the term *e-competencies* as a meta-competency, constituted by the interaction of e-awareness, technological literacy, informational literacy, digital literacy and media literacy. His recommendations in terms of teacher training include developing the know-how to pedagogically embed the ICTs in classrooms with higher levels of critical thinking and understanding of the relationship between technology and education, as well as engaging in casual use of ICTs to better integrate other resources to the student's formal or informal learning environment and sharing best practice and other experiences between colleagues.

The Department of Higher Education from UNESCO Paris (2004) advocates that teachers-to-be, throughout their educational programme, should have hands-on experience of a variety of technological resources so that they can explore creative uses of technology to implement in their own teaching practice. They should be able to see their professors model such uses in content areas rather than "learn about" resources in one particular subject.

However, the danger of what Sancho Gil (2002) calls "*the supremacy of artefacts*" should be borne in mind. If techniques, tools or resources are employed without the proper didactic and

curricular contextualization, old pedagogic practices will continue to be reproduced, and technological applications will be underpinned by factual principles of knowledge representation.

Connectivism, in my view, provides the proper theoretical framework for the effective implementation of ICTs in education. As a theory of learning it focuses on the establishment of networks. It defines knowledge as "*a particular pattern of relationships*" and learning as "*the creation of new connections and patterns as well as the ability to maneuver around existing networks/patterns*" (Siemens, 2008). Knowledge is then deemed "fluid", dependent on the context of the interactions, and technology is considered crucial in its distribution. The current abundance and changing nature of information require the collective efforts of a network to impose meaning on chaos.

It thus follows that the integration of social network sites (SNS) to education can go a long way to achieve the above mentioned goals. SNSs are defined as "*web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system*" (boyd & Ellison, 2007). As they are based on the peer-to-peer model (P2P) in which all members play the roles of server and client, they can provide an excellent environment for learners to "*create their own content, take control over their own learning, and reflect on the process to gain further insight*" (Dieu, Campbell & Ammann, 2006). Furthermore, such networks can create a context for interaction which, as opposed to the organised nature of the classroom, mirrors the "real world" in its heterogeneity, complexity and unpredictability.

In contrast, educational institutions have traditionally favoured Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs), and Instituto Nacional de Formación Docente has set up Red Nacional Virtual de Institutos de Formación Docente, which equips each state-run Higher Education institution with a VLE. Some of the features of VLEs, as suggested by Santamaria (2010) and Lubensky (2006) are the asymmetric power relations they establish, their homogeneous nature and the restriction of their access to a certain class during a certain period – which means students "lose" their production once they complete the course. In my personal experience, even though the one provided by INFD does offer good opportunities for forum interaction and a reliable communication interface, its visual component is extremely limited and it prevents student-to-student interaction. As Lubensky (2006) puts it, "most VLE implementations tend to perpetuate the traditional instructivist models of education".

In 2009 I decided to start a SNS on Ning Network, where I brought together four Literature classes I teach in two different institutions (one private and one state-funded), in addition to the four individual "classrooms" hosted on each institution's VLE to supplement physical classroom work. I then repeated the experience in 2010. Ning hosted the sites and enabled users to create a highly customisable network in terms of appearance, privacy and web visibility, where subgroups could be set up, and all members' blogs were brought together. In addition, all members were able to upload and embed photos, audio files and videos both from their own computers and from social sites, and personalise their pages, even adding widgets – all free of charge. Penenberg (2008) discusses the rationale behind the network. Unfortunately, this particular SNS has now changed its policy, so that all services need to be paid for, as reviewed by Stevens (2010). Other SNSs remain free – or at least have a free limited version – which I am currently exploring for future work.

The first obvious asset of a SNS is the ease with which images, videos and audio files can be shared. I contributed some at the beginning of the year, then I asked students to find material related to one particular topic, and eventually they started contributing voluntarily, whenever they found something they believed could be interesting for the rest. That is how we acquired a picture of the dust jacket designed by Vanessa Bell for the first edition of *To the Lighthouse*, a cartoon version of Roald Dahl's *Revolting Rhymes* based on the original illustrations by Quentin Blake and *The Great Gatsby* audio book, for example. Students posted comments on each other's contributions, and in some cases even uploaded personal photos which added a new, "social", dimension to the SNS.

Bloggging is typically an individual, independent activity. But integrated to a SNS a blog becomes social, and networks can be formed through the interactions among members. Discussions sparked off by blogposts are different from discussion forums in that they arise from the students' own entries instead of being determined by the teacher. In addition, by choosing whose posts to comment on, students start to develop their own learning network (Dalsgaard, 2006).

In my project, each member kept a blog, including myself. My blog was used to present topics which would otherwise not have been addressed in class, but which helped to enrich and expand issues by combining links, videos, images and/or slideshows and inviting some comment from the

students. Let me exemplify through "George Eliot and Henry James: painterly comparisons". The text of the post goes:

In his discussion of the changes in the novel at the turn of the century, Bradbury (1997, 19) compares the work of George Eliot and Henry James to different schools of painting: "Eliot's *Scenes from Provincial Life* followed the manner of past figurative Dutch genre painters: James' *Portrait of a Lady* was done in the fashion of a Whistler or a Sargent, followers of Impressionism."

followed by illustrations from Dutch genre painters, Whistler and Sargent, and links to further discussion of their work, and the invitation:

Can you find points of contact between the painters and the artists? Tell us below.

Responses by students included comparisons between choice of characters in Eliot and in Dutch genre painting, and James's use of point of view as a narrative device with the Impressionists' use of unusual visual angles.

The students' own blogs were used for some compulsory activities, such as keeping a reading journal, and in some cases they took advantage of them to contribute extra material. On discussing Postmodernism, a number of videos, slideshows and articles were offered to 4<sup>th</sup> year students for them to write a post commenting on the main features of Postmodernism reflected in the ones of their choice or contributing others they considered related, thus linking, for instance, Pop Art, Second Life educational environments and contemporary films to literary features, and exploring cultural productions from a broader perspective. The element of choice from a larger set encouraged the reading of classmates' posts to examine different realizations of the task.

One extremely successful use of blogging combined the creation of visual materials with reflection on the creative process. In the case of 2<sup>nd</sup> year, after dealing with narrative and lyrical poetry, students were asked to design a personal anthology (individually or in pairs) consisting of at least three poems or extracts from long poems, and including the selected poem, an image or group of images suggested by it and a comment explaining why that poem and that image had been chosen. A list of possible tools was provided, and realisations included Power Point presentations, films made on Movie Maker, "books" on Bookr (<http://www.pimpampum.net/bookr/index.php?id=9810>) and Prezi presentations (<http://prezi.com/tcin1ahuksg/assignment-3>). In this extract from one student's post it is clear how she was able to relate a medieval text to contemporary life:

The last extract, the one from "The Wife of Bath's Tale", I chose it because I agree with what the old lady says as regards poverty. I included a picture of a little aborigine girl from a refugees' camp drawing in the ground. It's amazing to see how despite the awful conditions under which they live, some people never lose their hope and happiness and live their lives in a simpler way. And as the extract says: "truly poor are they who whine and fret and covet what they cannot hope to get." (M.Z. – 2<sup>nd</sup> year)

All students were extremely eager to check out and leave a comment on others' productions. See for example these comments on the Prezi anthology:

Incredible!!! I love your presentation, it's original, you've worked on new software!!! I'll try this in the summer -I suppose I'll have more time!!! It's very interesting how you developed different views of the same theme: Love! Congratulations!!! (E.D. – 2<sup>nd</sup> year)

Wonderful presentation! I would like to use the computer as you do! Congrats! Interesting points about different kinds of love (S.W. – 2<sup>nd</sup> year)

One assignment for 4<sup>th</sup> year asked students to transform a novel analysed in class into a trailer or at least a visual representation of the text, and to post their rationale and aims. A number of tools were suggested, but otherwise they were free to choose. See this post on *To the Lighthouse*, which accompanied a film made up of a collage of images with ingenious transitions:

Through this mini video we have tried to show that an image can say more than thousands of words and that images, as well as paintings, can be "read" and interpreted. The series of black and white pictures represent the passing of time, decay and destruction, while the staircase, the presence of Mrs Ramsay in the house. We have chosen to emphasize Lily's perspective at the end of the video since we believe she is one of the most powerful characters. Besides, the last painting, shown after the closing phrase of the book, stands for what we believe Lily may have painted – a memorable image of a charming lady, a portrait of Mrs Ramsay. The accumulation and repetition of certain images create the feeling that the world is made up of diverse feelings and sensations and we are only passive observers, bombarded by these impressions. (C.G. and J.N. – 4<sup>th</sup> year)

It can be seen that in the environment of this SNS, students themselves became active creators of content, which was shared with classmates so that they could profit from it in their learning process. They all played the role of server and client, or "prosumers", in Tofler's words. Asynchronous communication took place among members of the same and different classes, which provided authenticity, and assignments posted became public, which gave the class the opportunity to see different perspectives without feeling they were "cheating" but rather collaborating, by referring back to them in their work. Clearly, students who had already developed e-competencies on their own were keener to explore new tools, but by the end of the year, everybody had tried their hand at one digital literacy activity at least, and it was precisely those who had no previous experience who were proudest of their achievements.

A number of issues remain to be worked out, however. One is the question of educating students about fair use of copyrighted material available on line, which I have not tackled conscientiously. A further consideration refers to how time-consuming these activities are for the students to carry out and for the teacher to provide feedback on. In addition to the heavy workload to be completed outside class periods, it is easy to lose sight of students' (and teacher's) comments as this SNS does not provide a tracking system of the kind available through a VLE. Directly related to such aspects is assessment: on the one hand, how to integrate the work produced into formal institutional policies; on the other, how to grade the multiplicity of variables present in students' contributions without being unfair to those with limited digital literacy skills at the start of the course. Furthermore, if assessment does not reflect the full extent of the effort required, some students may simply reduce their participation when burdened with other duties. Similar concerns are mentioned in Moayeri (2010), and it remains a challenge to tackle them.

On the whole, however, I consider that SNSs mesh well with both a connectivist approach to learning and with the development of e-competencies. In addition to being motivational, work on a SNS complementing a physical classroom empowers students to create content which moves beyond the purely textual to integrate image and sound. It also encourages them to collaborate and to reflect on their own and their peers' productions to gain further insight; in other words, to build collective knowledge. One of the 2009 students summarized it in this way:

I believe that the most enriching aspect of this class can be summarized in the word DIVERSITY- diversity of materials, diversity of activities, diversity of means to carry them out, diversity of opinions, and diversity of responsibilities – I mean that we are not 'forced' to work, we are all given the same possibilities to learn and to facilitate our studies, but each of us works differently and consequently, each of us is responsible for her own progress or failure. The fact that there is diversity in the class allows us to work independently and makes us more autonomous and self-confident. (M.E.L. – 4<sup>th</sup> year)

In short, by offering teachers-to-be a hands-on experience of flexible and innovative strategies integrating technology and education, we can contribute not only to their own learning in the present but also to their professional practice and empowering development through interaction with networks of colleagues in the future.

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