

Chapter 4.9

Publishing with Friends: Exploring Social Networks to Support Photo Publishing Practices

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ABSTRACT

Publishing with friends is the account of an action research cycle in which a print-on-demand Web site, Lulu.com, became a classroom for second and third year digital photography students to publish their photobooks. Building on the earlier use of a blogging platform as a personal learning environment, this narrative explores the pedagogical prospects of the read/write Web, and illustrates the way in which students use social networks for creative produsage (Bruns, 2008). Students were positive about the pedagogical approach, and the opportunities to gain valuable hands-on experience in their chosen field of study.

INTRODUCTION

The web is coming of age. Predicted almost 20 years ago, users with relatively unsophisticated informa-

tion technology skills are now able to use the internet as a medium to communicate and publish in what we have chosen to describe as the read/write web. (Also known as Web 2.0 technology, the “read/write web” seems to us a more descriptive appellation.) The increasingly ubiquitous nature of the web, and its unquestioned affordances, now challenge the academy to embrace technology in appropriate curricula and, in the process, to investigate the move from an industrial production model to the pragmatics of the web-led produsage, or user-led production, approach. Bruns (2008) focuses on the fluidity of the produsage process as a main characteristic – it is in the evaluation, the flexible leadership, its iterative nature and the attribution of social capital, rather than an end product, that the concept is defined.

Produsage in the higher education setting is the underlying theme of the chapter which maps this particular instance of produsage onto Bruns’ model. In the process, it describes the pedagogical underpinnings of the inquiry through the account of

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the use of the read/write web as an environment to teach students of digital photography; discusses the design of learning tasks and the engagement of students in the design of an assessment and feedback rubric; and explores the findings from the students' evaluation of the research intervention. Lastly, the implications of the research for future iterations of the digital photography units are set out.

BACKGROUND

The roots of the read/write web were described by Berners-Lee and Cailliau (1990); they explained hypertext and foresaw two phases in its development: firstly the use of existing browsers to access information (the read web) and also ease of publication on the web (the write web) with "the creation of new links and new material by readers. At this stage, authorship becomes universal." The authors predicted that "this phase [would] allow collaborative authorship" facilitated by the annotation of existing data, linking and adding documents.

Almost two decades later, their vision has become a reality. Online participatory culture is ubiquitous, and evidenced by the popularity of social network and media-sharing sites, multi-player games and other applications generally known as social software.

The academy is slowly entering this stage of "collaborative authorship". The term "classroom of the read/write web," coined by Richardson (2006), uses a familiar metaphor to translate this into a teaching and learning construct. Educators can assemble their own toolbox of freely available applications using the self-publishing technologies now abundant on the Internet; these may include weblogs, wikis, aggregators, social bookmarking, photo-sharing, rubric-making tools and many others. In his model, Richardson provides a pedagogical framework for the integration of these technologies in teaching and learning, in

the context of the publishing affordances of the read/write web, and emphasizes the four core literacies—reading, publishing, collaborating and information management—that can be developed in the online environment.

In practice, the read/write web classroom demands major shifts in the ways we think about content and curriculum. Richardson (2006) identifies these as follows: the web is viewed as an open classroom; learning takes place 24/7 in interaction between online peers and experts; collaboration leads to the social construction of meaningful knowledge; teaching is democratized, a conversation rather than a lecture; knowing where to find information takes precedence over the acquisition (and regurgitation) of facts; students aspire to edit information critically, to develop active reading and writing skills; web applications are used as digital notebooks to store and share information found online; writing is lent richness by augmentation with photography, audio and video; mastery of skills is demonstrated and assessed in the product (e.g. digital content creation) and marked tests are dispensed with; and, finally, course materials and coursework are a contribution to a larger body of knowledge (the web), can be reused by others, and are not completed and discarded at the end of the semester.

This model of the open classroom is a major challenge for the academy. Many artists and designers already use the read/write web in their everyday life, but universities seem reluctant to make the transition from an industrial age concept of knowledge (production) to one more in tune with the information age model of user-led education (produsage). Bruns (2008) coined the word *produsage* to describe the process of user-led production in the setting of networked practices.

Engagement in the read/write web or, more specifically in this instance, in the contemporary online self-publishing environment, allows academe to explore novel opportunities for teaching and learning. These are underpinned by the four key principles of *produsage*: the implicit evalua-

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