Social media literacy and students' voices

A Curriculum Design Collaboration

Abby Amoakuh, Ryan Doyle, Tianyi Jing, Graham Meikle and Carlotta Roveri

Introduction

This Curriculum Design Collaboration project was designed to involve learners in a structured review of two core modules led by Professor Graham Meikle of the School of Media and Communication. Graham teaches a core Level 4 module on the BA Digital Media and Communication and a core Level 7 module on the MA Social Media, Culture and Society every autumn. Both modules make extensive use of social media platforms as learning and teaching spaces. Each has a social media portfolio assignment that requires a series of weekly blog posts throughout the semester, a photo essay and a video essay; learners are also required to post substantive comments on classmates' work, which adds social dimensions to the assignment. Overall, the portfolio assignments are designed to enable learners to

- write for a small, supportive audience
- develop and explore ideas from the class
- share ideas, links and feedback with each other

Graham has developed this approach over many years, using collaborative class blogs since 2005, and photo and video essays since 2008. Social media are spaces of rapid change, so it is essential to revise and update these modules every year. This Curriculum Design Collaboration offered an opportunity to bring learners' voices more fully into this revision and into the curriculum.

The project group was made up of Graham, and four first-year undergraduates from the BA Digital Media and Communication course: Abby Amoakuh, Ryan Doyle, Tianyi Jing (Skyler) and Carlotta Roveri. These learners were each invited after excelling in the social media portfolio assignment in autumn 2018. The Curriculum Design Collaboration project particularly sought the learners' input on two related aspects of social media as learning spaces:

(1) Choice of platforms, and whether the learners perceive any social or ethical difficulties in using certain popular platforms for coursework.

(2) Media literacies, and how to develop a reflective, critical understanding of different aspects of media literacy within these modules.

The project group met three times in spring 2019 for two-hour workshops. The learners' input from these workshops has been used in writing a revised social media portfolio brief for both BA and MA modules for autumn 2019. The MA brief is attached to this report as an appendix.

Background and rationale

These assignments are designed to develop learners' social media literacy. The House of Commons' Digital, Culture, Media and Sport committee recommended in 2019 that: 'digital literacy should be a fourth pillar of education, alongside reading, writing and maths' (2019: 96). Of course, the everyday uses of YouTube or Instagram have become second nature to many hundreds of millions of people. But there is more to literacy than everyday use. We should not accept the assumption that people who grow up surrounded by digital media are natively literate in their uses and possibilities (Buckingham 2003). This generational fantasy of the 'digital native' elides fundamental questions of literacy.

The ongoing development of these assignments has been informed by literature on media literacy (Hoechsmann & Poyntz 2012, Potter 2019). It has also drawn upon work in the related area of information literacy — search, navigation, evaluation (Marcum 2002, Hobbs 2006, Livingstone *et al* 2008). Moreover, the rise of social media has also brought new literacy dimensions of collaborative creativity, remix aesthetics, and uncertain privacy (Jenkins *et al* 2009, Knobel & Lankshear 2010, Hunter *et al* 2013, Meikle 2016). To empower today's learners, the challenge for media educators is to accommodate all of these within our teaching. Social media literacy is about both media literacy and information literacy skills in the context of the ongoing practical and conceptual convergence of content, computing and communications, and the resulting networked digital media environment in which public and personal communication are combined.

These assignments use social media platforms as spaces for reflective learning; they are not intended as practical training for aspiring influencers or YouTubers, but as opportunities to develop critical media literacies through reflective use, informed by serious reading. They invite learners to *access, interpret* and *evaluate* a wide range of social media content — these are skills broadly concerned with *reading* in networked digital environments. They invite learners to *remix, organise* and *create* a wide range of social media content — these are skills broadly concerned with *writing* in multimodal digital environments. And they invite learners to *collaborate* and *share* — these are skills that are broadly concerned with *interacting* with others. As Benkler puts it: 'The practice of producing culture makes us all more sophisticated readers, viewers, and listeners, as well as more engaged makers' (2006: 275).

Project workshops

The first workshop focused on the video essay assignment. The group reviewed a range of video essays by learners in Graham's classes from as far back as 2008. The discussion explored some of the copyright dimensions to remix assignments, and whether the weighting of marks for the video essay was substantial enough. One useful outcome was that the group felt that increasing the marks allocated to the various elements of the portfolio assignments might discourage some learners from creative experimentation, and argued that if there were much more at stake, the temptation would be to play it safe.

The second workshop focused on choices of platform. Since 2005 Graham has at different times used Blogger, YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, Wikipedia, Flickr, Medium, Pinterest and Tumblr as learning spaces. One outcome of this workshop was to move the photo essay assignment to Instagram for September 2019. The various platform assignments centre on a class blog hosted at the Google-owned Blogger platform, and we discussed whether this now-20-year-old platform is still optimal. WordPress is an obvious alternative to Blogger, but the learners' experience of this in other modules has been that it is more complicated to use effectively. Compared to rival platforms Medium and Tumblr, Blogger offers a better balance of ease-of-use, accessibility and privacy options. Blackboard of course offers tools for class blogs, but not everyone finds Blackboard user-friendly, and the environment

may inhibit some learners in approaching the more creative elements of the portfolio; moreover, it is important that these assignments use authentic everyday platforms in order to enable critical reflection on social media use. So the outcome of this discussion was that the portfolio assignments will continue using the Google blogging platform. One other very useful outcome of this second session was a discussion of the very wide range of different effects that can be achieved through hyperlinks and hashtags — such as sharing resources, offering examples, setting context, suggesting further reading, promoting something, expressing irony or conveying a sense of the author's personality. This prompted the addition of a small new assignment that asks the learners to focus on the very different dimensions of meaning that links can add to a text.

The final workshop drew together lessons learned from the first two as well as from our different experiences of the social media assignments as teacher and learner. The group brainstormed a list of 12 pieces of advice that they would give to new students approaching these tasks next semester. We then set ourselves the challenge of expressing these 12 points in a photo essay on Instagram. Our challenge was to create this in one hour in the library. The resulting artefact, while not intended to be a polished piece of visual communication, does include all the key ideas the group wanted to share with incoming learners, and it is itself an example of the kind of work they are asked to produce for this assignment:
http://www.instagram.com/internetcultures.

Outcomes

The social media portfolio assignment briefs for both core modules have been completely revised and refreshed for use in September 2019. There are new blog tasks, new emphases, a new use of Instagram for the photo essay, and the text of the assignment briefs has been rewritten for clarity. The Instagram profile that we created in the third workshop will be used in introductory sessions for both modules, and may serve as a stimulus and model for end-of-semester activities in those classes.

What we learned

Abby — What I learned was to look at social media from a researcher's perspective but particularly in this project, to compare different platforms in their usefulness to deliver concise messages. I also learned how much fun it is to work in a group and to collaborate with each other to create different tasks and projects (The Instagram page) that will help a new generation of students to engage better with the module.

Carlotta — I understood the effort and attention to the smallest details that is behind even a simple portfolio. Moreover, I saw, thanks to the sharing of ideas with other students, how there is still much to learn about digital platforms.

Graham — I learned how much space there is for more student voices in the curriculum. And I learned that it can be fun and rewarding to invite those voices in.

Ryan — It made me think about what collaboration means to me and how that can be useful to build ideas about the digital era; and later what that means for society and the online sphere. This in all increased my interest in the field of digital media as it proved how dynamic and progressive the digital landscape is and how we can analyse and discuss our digital future in a progressive manner as students and participants in this field.

Skyler — Being able to engage in the curriculum design process and discussing with other students and the professor really give me more insights into Internet Cultures. No matter what kind of essay form the students adopt, it should be informative enough to show their evidence of academic research and thoughts on the subject. However in this information era,"content is king"is not the only creed for media researchers. The way of conveying information is important as well. The best work is always the one that conveys the most information in a short amount of time while it could also manage to keep it attractive to the target viewer group.

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Appendix — MA social media portfolio brief for September 2019

We are all going to blog together throughout the semester at <https://masocialmedia2019.blogspot.com>. Every week, you have to make at least one post *and* at least two comments in response to classmates' posts. Your posts are always due the day *after* our weekly class; your comments are due by no later than the following Monday. Your contributions to the blog will be assessed together at the end of semester and given a single overall mark. You will be assessed on evidence of engagement with ideas, and on clarity and effectiveness of communication. The social media portfolio is worth **50%** of your overall grade for the module.

We are using the blog to:
- write for a small, supportive audience
- develop and explore ideas from the class
- share ideas, links and feedback with each other

You can find some tips from previous students here <https://www.instagram.com/internetcultures>.

A good post will make a clear point. A conversational tone works best. Thoughtful use of links is essential, and you can use links in many different ways (such as sharing resources, offering examples, setting context, suggesting further reading, promoting something, expressing irony or conveying a sense of the author's personality). Your posts should make connections between original examples and our readings, lectures and other course materials. You can use the multimedia possibilities of the web to develop your point — images, videos, GIFs, memes, animation, sound, music, hashtags and links. It's important to be concise, so try to keep your posts to around 300 words each. Make sure to discuss your topic rather than just describe it.

A good comment will start or develop a conversation. Try to respond to the point your classmate is making rather than the examples they use. A good comment will respond to the ideas in the post. A good comment will offer new information and new links to develop discussion. For instance, you might point to a connection with the readings or lectures. Or you might point to a connection with another idea on our blog. Or you might ask a question about the post that you really are curious about. It's not enough to write just 'yeah' or 😂. Again, links are essential.

Some blog dos and don'ts

do connect ideas from readings and classes to original examples
do use lots of links
do use the multimedia potential of the web — images, video, audio, links, GIFs, hashtags
do try to engage your classmates with your writing and your comments

don't post admin questions about the module (ask these in class)
don't expect responses from your lecturer to everything you post (there are lots of you)
don't post summaries of readings (we've all read them)
don't post unrelated trivia (get your own blog instead :)

Blog assignments

1) Write a paragraph to introduce yourself to the class — who are you, where are you from, what do you like, why are you here? Add several links to your paragraph, and pay attention to the different ways you can do this (to add detail, to give examples, to promote something, to make a joke, and so on). Add at least one image (it doesn't have to be a picture of you) and embed a video from YouTube.

2) Find something online that you think is useful for students in this class. Try to find something that you think will help the class with their studies or with life in London. You might find an app or a podcast or a TED talk or a video, for instance. Link to it and explain why it's useful.

3) Choose a social media platform or app that you have used for a long time. In what ways would your life have been different without it? What has it added to your life? Are there any things that you don't like about its role in your life? How would things change for you if it disappeared today?

4) This week you are to make a photo essay about the concept of *remix* and post it on Instagram. See detailed instructions below. Share it with the class by posting it on our blog. Your blog post should reflect on what you learned from making your photo essay.

5) How much data about us exists online and how much of it is under our control? Read this 40-tweet thread by writer Dylan Curran on how much data social media companies hold about him
https://twitter.com/iamdylancurran/status/977559925680467968. Then choose a social media platform that you use, and research how much data it holds about you. How much information can you find about what data they collect on you? How easy is it to download your data? Are there any surprises? Any concerns? Write a blog post about what you learn from this exercise.

6) Now that you've got the idea, it's up to you to decide what topic to blog about this week. Just make sure it connects in some way with the themes and concerns of this module.

7) Reflect on the responses to your previous post (or lack of them), and use this peer feedback in again choosing for yourself what to blog about for this week's contribution. Again, the topic is up to you, as long as your post connects to the themes and concerns of this module.

8) What do you think is the most important idea raised in this module's reading? The more specific the better. Make a 2 to 3-minute video essay that expresses your point-of-view on this idea and why it is important, and post it on YouTube. See detailed instructions below for more details. Share your video essay with the class by posting it on our blog. Your blog post should reflect on what you learned from making your video essay.

Instagram photo essay

This assignment asks you to create a photo essay that expresses a single clear argument about some aspect of the readings for the *remix cultures* topic. You are to use Instagram to express that argument as a photo essay. Then share your photo essay with the class by posting a link to it on our blog.

Remember it's an essay – it's not a photography assignment. Like any other essay, it's an opportunity to develop your abilities in clear communication of ideas and information. And like any other essay, it should demonstrate your reading and thinking for this class.

Your photo essay should be *either* 9 *or* 12 images, arranged so that the overall set makes a clear overall point. Each picture should make a clear contribution to your overall argument.

You can make your own pictures or find them. As well as photos, you can use GIFs, memes, screenshots, slides, drawings (scan them), or any other form of image accepted by Instagram.

You can use captions and tags, but should otherwise keep words to a minimum for this assignment and try to communicate your argument through the images and their arrangement.

Think about how your images *connect* to each other. Suggest meanings through the relationships between the images — don't just post a bunch of unrelated pictures and leave the viewer to guess at what you mean.

Note that learning to use Instagram is *not* the point of this assignment. Instead, the point is to *communicate and share an idea through images*.

Remember that this is a kind of *essay* and so should make an argument and engage with readings from our course — so a series of selfies run through different filters is *not* going to be enough :)

If you are an Instagram user already, you should create a separate account for this (a Finsta), so that your assignment does not get mixed up with the rest of your Instagram life.

If you are not an Instagram user, take a little time to explore the app and to experiment with the different possibilities. There are useful tips at its 'support' page: https://help.instagram.com.

To get a sense of what these photo essays look like, here are some examples from previous years, when the assignment was done on Tumblr: https://forfreedomssakeuni.tumblr.com and https://raeknightrider.tumblr.com and https://remixingdisneyculture.tumblr.com.

YouTube video essay

This assignment asks you to make a 2 to 3-minute video essay that uses images to express your thoughts about an idea from the module.

Remember it's an essay – it's not a filmmaking assignment. Like any other essay, it's an opportunity to develop your abilities in clear communication of ideas and information. And like any other essay, it should demonstrate your reading and thinking for this class.

Making this kind of video essay is not as technically demanding as it might sound, so there are no lab sessions or workshops. You can make a video essay using domestic lifestyle software such as iMovie or iPhoto on Macs, or Microsoft Photos/Story Remix. If you have skills with more advanced editing or animation software, you can use those, but the important thing is the *ideas,* not the technical execution. You could even use something as simple as Powerpoint, or other presentation software such as Prezi. Other online options might also be available. Also, YouTube contains many tutorials on making and uploading videos that will be very useful.

Unless you have experience of filmmaking, we suggest you should use still images.

You can also use sound, if you like: you can add music, or a voiceover.

And if it helps to clarify your points, you can also use onscreen subtitles or text cards. But try to communicate using images.

This video essay assignment was originally inspired by the concept of *digital storytelling,* an approach to sharing personal life-stories that became popular some years ago. This 4-minute video for digital storytellers contains a lot of very useful advice that is also helpful for this video essay assignment: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NipDAd3_7Do. The video itself is also an example of the video essay approach – notice how it uses only simple, pre-existing images looped together. The video suggests some things you can think about to make your own work clearer — for example, think carefully about your point-of-view, about your audience, and about how to engage that audience (you could engage them with questions, with emotions, with sounds and with pacing or rhythm, for instance).

To get an idea of how these look, here are two outstanding examples from previous semesters: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jPvzIVM3SI0> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KVs25sFYUl8>. We will discuss some others in class.

Marking criteria for social media portfolio

Criterion	Needs work	Satisfactory	Good	Excellent
Clear engagement with the set blog tasks				
Clarity and effectiveness of communication				
Effective use of blog medium, including links, images and video				
Constructive comments on classmates' posts				
Mark				

70%+. Excellent. Among other things, these very best posts will demonstrate a complex, critical understanding of the themes of the module. They will communicate very effectively, making excellent and creative use of the possibilities of the form (including links, videos, and images), and may be written with some skill and flair. They will make insightful connections between original examples and relevant concepts, and will probably be rewarding and informative for the reader. In addition, comments made on classmates' posts will be thoughtful and conscientious, making consistent attempts to develop discussion and to add new resources, including links.

60-69%. Good. Among other things, good posts will make a clear point in a clear way. They will relate concepts to original examples in a straightforward fashion. They will make effective use of the possibilities of the form (including links, videos and images). They may also demonstrate a broader understanding of the module's themes and concerns, and are likely to show evidence of reading and thinking about the subject material. In addition, comments made on classmates' posts will be solid and conscientious, making some attempts to develop discussion and to add new resources, including links.

50-59%. Satisfactory. Among other things, satisfactory posts may try to relate an idea from the module to an original example, but might not be very convincing. They may not find the best balance between description and making a point. They may have some spelling or grammatical errors and typos. In addition, comments made on classmates' posts will often need more attempts to develop discussion and to add new resources, including links.

40-49%. Refer. Among other things, such posts may struggle to establish connections to ideas from the module. They may be largely descriptive, at the expense of making a point. They may have frequent spelling or grammatical errors and typos. There may not be sufficient commenting on classmates' posts, with little evidence of effort to introduce new ideas or links to develop discussion.

0-39%. Fail. Such work may show some understanding of the intended learning outcomes and assessment requirements, but will not meet those outcomes or requirements. In some cases, such work may not demonstrate any engagement with the module or with the assignment.