

**Learning to Leisure? Failure, Flame, Blame, Shame, Homophobia and Other
Everyday Practices in Online Education**

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So the impulse towards democratic education is both cross-institutional and cross-cultural, and those in the vanguard are a mixed bunch. One of the crucial commitments they have in common, however, is the commitment to the right use of language. . . . Those who “bear witness” spot their own recurrent images and are alert to the linguistic usage of others. A commitment to democratic education involves a deep entanglement with the exactitudes of communication. Saying what you mean and saying it in such a way that others will grasp what it is you intend to say is central to the democratic process. It is also, crucially, the substance of humanistic, democratic education.

Jon Nixon (2007, p. 69)

Publishers churn out teaching textbooks and warm celebrations of the e-education age. The affirmations of the value of online platforms to and for teaching and learning seem obvious and indisputable. Digital dissenters struggle to gain space on such lists. Rarely do educators hear about – and even more rarely do we read about – stories of e-failure in the classroom. Funding agencies do not like such talk. Neither do writers of university strategic and corporate plans. However, in this article, we disclose and discuss an e-teaching failure. The causes of this failure are complex but invoke a significant warning for those who write curriculum. We map a singular teaching hypothesis: when using platforms most frequently positioned in leisure-based environments, such as the iPod, text messaging and discussion fora, there are institutional and ideological blockages to creating a successful learning experience and scholarly environment. We are interested in how leisure platforms can translate into education and how to manage the residues of conversation, informality, blame and shame.

Clichés of Web 2.0, social networking, user-generated content and user-generated contexts presuppose that citizens who are literate in the digital environment will also be literate in social and legal codes that govern behavior. Yet significant statistics reveal a more complex story. Hopkins suggested that Web 2.0 users are “voyeurs rather than

creators.” She confirmed that active participation through the generation of content is incredibly low:

The 1% rule (1% make content, 10% add, 89% just view) overstates it. Of US internet visits to YouTube, only 0.16% were to upload videos; 0.2% of Flickr visits were to load photos. Wikipedia bucks the trend: 4.59% of visits are to edit or create entries. Those tend to be older than the average Wikipedia visitor (over 35) and more likely to be male. (2007, p. 4)

Too often social networking is a mask for puffed-up self-absorption, libertarianism in the name of democracy (Kelly, 2005), or – at its most excessive - individualized flaming. Phrases, words and descriptions that would never be spoken to the face of a teacher or student are freely exchanged from behind a pixelated screen. The consequences to universities, teachers and learners of aligning student-centered learning, facilitation, collaboration and team teaching in an environment of Web 2.0 are underwritten projects. This current paper presents the costs of intrinsically valuing students’ voices and words and how this ideology may undermine wider goals of social equity and justice.

Hartley stated that “universities will ignore the lesson of consumer-led, distributive, iterative and multi-sourced learning at their peril” (2007, p. 144). Ignorance is not an option, but validating homophobia, malice, laziness and disrespect because they are “consumer-led” and “distributive” should not be part of the default rationale for deploying user-generated content or social networking sites or even serve as an affirmation of University 2.0. Too often pseudo-democracy is valued over leadership. In education, the cost of such a decision is not only a denial of expertise but a destruction of the expertise that creates a curriculum.

In a research project based in a working-class school in the analog age, Willis (1977) foreshadowed our e-education future. In *Learning to Labour*, Willis entered the cultures of young working-class men. His research found that the lads – through smoking, swearing and truancy – negotiated a transitory resistance against the system. They challenged the hierarchy and power structure of a school but were then disenfranchised from social mobility via education. Such a tactic meant that working-class boys became working-class men. While, as students, they probed the ideologies of schooling, the greatest cost was to their future, not “the system.” In our current analysis, we carry forward Willis’s analysis and explore student behavior at universities in and through the digital platform, probing the consequences of student “resistance.”

EDUCATION: TEXT AND CONTEXT

Making (not receiving) messages and meanings in your own context and from materials you have appropriated is, in essence, a form of education in the broadest sense. It is the specifically developmental part of symbolic work, an education about “the self” and its relation to the world and to others in it. Where everyday symbolic work differs from what is normally thought of as “education” is that it “culturally produces” from its own chosen symbolic resources.

Paul Willis (1990, p. 137)

There is a well-established historical trend of projecting great optimism or intense pessimism onto information and communication technologies. The Internet and its associated platforms have not been immune from this ideological shaping and have alternately been heralded as ushering in a “brave new world” of democratic education or corrosive of teaching and learning. Computer-mediated communication (CMC) is subject to the same utopic and dystopic claims. Arguments range from championing the ability of CMC environments to grant users an equal voice, thereby reducing or

eliminating “real world” power differentials, or the recognition that unmediated communication, devoid of “real world” social identifications, serves to foster uninhibited and aggressive communication behaviors including flaming.

The increasing incorporation of virtual and/or managed learning environments into higher education institutions creates opportunities to use computer-mediated communication such as discussion boards and chat rooms as an integral part of classroom delivery. The adoption of information and communication technologies, in the form of virtual or managed learning environments (VLEs and MLEs) has been increasing within the UK higher education sector. Research from Wallis suggests that over 70% of UK institutions of higher education “are currently engaged in some kind of MLE development activity,” with “enhancing the quality of teaching and learning” being seen as the key driver (2003). The term MLE refers to the totality of systems and processes within an institution that contribute to the management of learning. VLEs are a subset of these. The term refers to the components which provide online learning, such as discussion boards, email facilities and spaces for the delivery of teaching materials.

The adoption of online learning has largely been met with enthusiasm, at least at the level of infrastructural rollout, with “teaching support” often conflating with “technological support” in universities. The ability of the technology to deliver distance (and – importantly – low cost) courses has been a way to enhance an institution’s reputation, branding and worldwide reach. The University of Phoenix is a clear example of a branded institution which has based its fee-paying success on flexibly delivered online distance education courses. Similarly, the Open University in the United Kingdom, long a specialist and innovator in the field of distance education, is now aiming

to expand its brand internationally (MacLeod & Ford, 2006). Much of the literature is enthusiastic about the role of CMC within online learning environments, providing lecturers with advice on how to build and develop online spaces and to encourage participation.

The University of Brighton has been developing an MLE over the last few years which uses the software platform Blackboard to deliver the VLE component. The ideological directive of this program is captured by its name: Studentcentral. Such a label not only connotes a hub of student activity but also the central educational focus on student discussion and information. The functions include email, discussion boards, and a “Virtual Classroom” (online chat room). While many monographs and papers confirm the value of such online education initiatives, this current article offers a caveat and corrective. Instead of providing theoretical affirmations of the Virtual Classroom, we explore an actual incident that emerged through the use of Studentcentral by a group of first-year undergraduate students and involved Juliet Eve, one of the authors of this paper. At that time, she was new to the experience of computer-mediated education. Through collaboration with Tara Brabazon, a personal view of a teaching moment has been broadened to explore the significance of an accidental experiment in teaching and learning (van Es & Sherin, 2002). We argue that there are consequences in shifting leisure-based platforms and tropes of social networking and dialogue into an educational environment. There are many consequences, including a flattening of the hierarchy between students and teachers.

Much of the research and writing about CMC has focused on the absence of social cues available to participants in online communication environments (generally presumed

to be isolated and/or geographically distant), and the attendant factor of anonymity.

These are presumed to lead to a loss of identity and a weakening of social norms, known as deindividuation. Consistent with trends in projecting utopian or dystopian qualities onto the Internet more generally, the characteristics have been used to argue that CMC is more democratic and egalitarian than face-to-face (F2F) interaction as it allows greater and more equal participation (Tiffin & Rajasingham, 2003). Conversely, Bordia (1997) notes that because communicators are deprived of visual cues that indicate social context, CMC may encourage greater antisocial – or anti-normative – behavior including flaming (p. 99). This recognition leads to these questions: How does normative group behavior manifest itself, and *which* salient group norms are drawn on if there is more than one mode available? Does the choice permit anti-normative and/or uninhibited behavior?

TO FLAME OR NOT TO FLAME

The elitism of intellectuals comes, not merely from our assumption that we already know the answers, but even more from our assumption that we already know the questions. It would, however, be too easy to assume that we simply need to ask our students what the questions are. We need to use our authority, mobilized through a pedagogy of risk and experimentation, to discover what the questions can be in the everyday lives of our students and what political possibilities such questions open up. We have to be willing to enter the terrain of everyday life, the terrain of dispersed Others, in order to make sense of the realities of their (our) lives. Only then can we prize open already existing contradictions.

Lawrence Grossberg (1994, p. 20)

Flaming is non-normative behavior in a digital environment (Vrooman, 2002 pp. 51-70). Vrooman challenged the idea that flaming is unique to CMC by virtue of the lack of social cues. He located it within a historical tradition of “performative invective” which includes the rant and “the dozens” (p. 54) and which can be seen in musical forms

such as calypso or rap. Flaming becomes an artistic performance, a “strategic negotiation of rhetorical and social situation” (p. 65) A “flame war” becomes a performative game where silencing the opponent indicates a win.

Similarly, Kayany in his study of flaming in four newsgroups confirmed the hostility and ridicule of these environments (1998, p. 1135-1141). O’Sullivan and Flanagan challenged the focus on defining and *interpreting* flaming and sought to “reconceptualize” such messages within a framework that allows for greater flexibility of interpretation based on the intentionality of the communicators. They suggested that the key question is one of perception:

For example, the casual use of profane language between close friends can be a marker of relationship closeness. Friends have been known to address each other with hostile or vulgar terms as a form of play or friendly verbal jousting. (2003, p. 69)

They cite a 1992 study by McCormick and McCormick which suggests that, rather than being hostile, or an expression of dislike, threats and put-downs “may be an adolescent sign of affection and trust among some male, undergraduate, computer users” (p. 90). While noting this reading of intimacy, O’Sullivan and Flanagan (2003) developed what they term an “interactional norm cube,” which allows for eight possible interpretations of a given message, seen as “appropriate” or a “transgression” by the sender, receiver and third-party observer. For example, a message may be seen by both sender and receiver as appropriate in local literacies and modes of communication but viewed as transgressive by a third party: “In organizations, such messages may involve language that violates policy or legal standards on their face even though they are perceived as appropriate to

interactants” (p. 83). O’Sullivan and Flanagan’s framework allows them to define “flames” as “intentional (whether successful or unsuccessful) negative violations of (negotiated, evolving, and situated) interactional norms” (p. 84). They draw a distinction from unconscious or unintended contraventions of discursive normalities within online communities. While their model allows for flexibility and is helpful in distinguishing what may be seen as appropriate by the different parties involved, there is an ambivalent application of this model in the case revealed in this current article. There was a series of inappropriate statements made that violated and transgressed the norms of formal education. The desire of some students was to flame and challenge power and authority in a setting where leisure-based modalities bled into educational institutions and the rules governing students’ identities as formal learners.

The O’Sullivan and Flanagan model is useful in understanding harassment, which may also come fall into their category of miscommunication (“the misalignment of norm sets”) where intent is not present. They found this distinction “also helps to highlight instances when speech that inflicts harm on a recipient is best understood as miscommunication when the intent to violate norms is absent” (p. 88). Their work is valuable, but there are caveats and concerns with this form of distinction. There is a disregard of the complex power issues that are involved in cases of harassment. Conflicting norms create difficulties in aligning expectations and resolving disparate codes and forms of behavior.

O’Sullivan and Flanagan also made no reference to the masculine inflections of flaming. Vrooman (2002), for example, acknowledged that there does seem to be something “resolutely masculinist” about invective performances and notes their often

sexualized character. He sees them as “displays of the prowess and skill of a chosen identity, an aspect of masculine display” (p. 64). Herring maintained that “it is virtually only men who flame” (1994). While he confirmed that both men and women dislike flaming, it is more tolerable for men due to a valuing of freedom from censorship and adversarial debate. Similarly, Vrooman’s discussion of “the art of invective” suggests a Western tradition of this type of “privileged rhetorical identity” that is overwhelmingly masculine (p. 55). For Vrooman, cyberspace is a performative space, created through programming and communicative interaction. Similarly, a seminar in a university can be seen as a performative space, governed by rules and conventions. There are actors involved, such as tutors and students, as well as the physical space of the seminar. While this space is constituted via communicative interaction, it is regulated with reference to a particular set of normative behaviors, if not rules. These may well be open to challenge, (re-) negotiation and resistance, but it is unusual for them to be completely overturned or transgressed.

Common Culture

Insofar as education/training becomes ever more subordinated to technical instrumentalism and to the “needs” of industry, it will be seen as a necessary evil to be tolerated in order to obtain access to the wage in order to obtain access to leisure and consumption and their cultural energies ... We need an altogether new approach to education.

Paul Willis (1990, p. 147)

In a CMC environment, the rules and normative behaviors may be much less clear in online environments due to the relative newness of their existence within higher education. Further, Willis’s critique signifies how education is justified and framed in a post-Fordist environment of lifestyle and post-work (Aronowitz, 1992). The use of CMC

discussion boards or chat rooms is not yet an established feature of the majority of teaching practice and is therefore not enfolded in precise guidelines and regulations. Much CMC research has focused on the key aspects of anonymity, de-individuation and absence of social cues that characterize online environments. While the literature encompasses a range of positions – ranging from the utopian to the dystopic – much CMC research is focused on the consequences of separating bodies from identities and actions from socially sanctioned responsibilities.

The data presented in our article emerged not from a deliberately constructed experimental setting but from an accidental teaching event arising from the use of a CMC space – the Virtual Classroom – as part of an undergraduate teaching session. Juliet Eve was a session facilitator and was a novice user of CMC environment. She had not thought through the implications of running a virtual seminar for the first time and the possible scenarios and trajectories of the session. Significantly, without a clear modality and guidelines in place about group norms for behavior, students shifted leisure-based language and practices into an educational environment. The key – which is even more significant through the rhetoric of Web 2.0 – is that intervention is required so that students disconnect web-based behavior for leisure from the web-framed behavior in teaching and learning. While the literature from Flew and others has valued the positioning of education in life and work – as exemplified by his phrase “learner-earner”(Flew 2002) there are consequences of blurring teaching and learning moments with consumerism, life and lifestyle.

The aim of the teaching session was to introduce students to debates encircling the use of the Internet as a tool for political engagement. There was attention to the use

of websites and email by politicians and activists, to explore the potential of online communication to enhance democracy. The students were first-year undergraduates studying a media and communications module. After an introductory lecture, in which students were directed towards issues for discussion and shown a short video, they re-assembled in the computer suite and logged into Studentcentral, where they were able to interact using both the Virtual Classroom space and a discussion board. This was an artificial setting that should have provided the discursive clues to separate this online event from leisure-based digital dialogue. The students were known to each other and were an established group at this stage in the term. They were also sitting in close proximity to each other and the tutor. In terms of conducting experiments within CMC research, the physical presence of not only their peers but also the tutor (and another facilitator) undermines the *raison d'être* of online communication – namely that it facilitates communication for geographically separated people. However, what is significant about this setting was the extent to which students behaved in ways that might have been expected to be facilitated by anonymity and physical disconnection.

The aim of the session, as conceived by the tutor, was for students to discuss issues arising from the video, structured around a set of initial questions that they had been given and that were also posted alongside the directions in Studentcentral for logging into the Virtual Classroom. At the end of the session, the tutor downloaded the complete text of the session for analysis. Additional material came from a number of messages posted to the discussion board over the two days following the session by two of the students.

Twenty-one students logged into the Virtual Classroom during a forty-minute period. Some remained for about half an hour while others entered and quickly left again. What became clear from early in the session was the inability of the tutor to “control” behavior, or even to lead/mediate/ facilitate discussion. The rapid descent into “flaming” meant that within minutes three male students had precluded any attempt by others to discuss the set educational tasks. What also emerged was the “anarchy” of communication, with several unrelated strands carrying on simultaneously. Significantly, the voice of the tutor was ignored. Two female students entered the VC first and were on their own for five minutes. They began to discuss issues such as access to technology but soon left the discussion to experiment with the discussion board. In fact, they then continued the discussion offline and face to face instead. What is significant when reading the printout of the session is that the two women stayed on topic and their discussion was both appropriate and useful. The moment that two male students entered the space, the modality was transformed, and the abuse commenced. Obviously, all names have been changed to ensure the anonymity of the participants.

| | |
|------------|---|
| Trish | hello chums |
| Liz | wondering if any one else was here |
| Trish | just us two |
| Juliet Eve | hi you found it well done!! |
| Liz | wasn't too difficult |
| Trish | yeah, its really lively! |
| Juliet Eve | so, will this way of communicating create a revolution? |
| Trish | I think it already has |
| Juliet Eve | how so? |
| Trish | well that video was from 1995, right? Which is like 7 years ago |
| Trish | technology has become even more useful |
| Trish | video conferencing etc |
| Trish | and no one can predict the future either |
| Liz | the amount of people connected to the internet has increased |
| Trish | very true |
| Liz | but what they said about Africa not having access |

Trish yeah, what was that, like 2 out of 100
Liz well most people in Africa don't have fridges or food
Trish exactly
Liz more importantaly
Trish it's a different culture
Phil ello peeps
Liz but I do think that what the academic said about like minded
 people only contacting and connecting with other like minded
 people is true but it also the case in real life
John *****, i'm gonna rinse you.

It is a stark and startling transformation in the discussion from this point. While Liz and Trish stayed on topic and replicated a tutorial mode of discussion, the moment that Phil and John entered the space, the potential for learning moments or scholarly dialogue declined. The other members of the group were unable to reclaim this discussion.

Tanya has anyone got anything remotely interesting to say?
Phil erm.. no
Tanya well that says it all!
John erm... beavers and ducks.
Phil john likes boys
Juliet Eve so, how do you think this different from physically being in a
 seminar?

The students were soon able to answer Juliet Eve's question, but in an unexpected way. An aspect of the VC that was also available to the students was a "blackboard" that allowed them to draw pictures. They took immediate advantage of this facility to draw male genitalia. Juliet Eve, rapidly learning how to use the controls to clear content, wiped these drawings and finally closed off that aspect of the VC. Some of the commentary reflects attempts to use this feature:

Phil i'm about to draw something good ...
John x-rated...
Karen drawing the willy?
Paul !'£\$%^&**&&%(&*\$*(
Phil got it in one

As well as being able to ignore tutor interventions and attempts to drag the discussion towards the learning goals, students were also able to make the kind of comments they would not make in the presence of a tutor. For example, mocking the content of the lecture session and the video in particular was a favorite activity:

| | |
|-----------|---|
| Christina | that video today was enthralling |
| Laura | I fell asleep... |
| Paula | Felicity is staying in tonight she has borrowed the video of[f] Juliet to watch again |

Again, learning quickly to use the behind-the-scenes controls, Juliet Eve realised it was possible to eject students from the classroom. This decision led to a more overt power struggle as students found ways of sneaking back in or taking over other students' identities.

A few students hijacked a communication space to perform aspects of their social identities rather than their students-in-classroom identities.

| | |
|------------|--|
| Felicity | whats the crack tonight? |
| Juliet Eve | interesting how the technology encourages you all to behave like kindergarten children |
| John | cocktails? |
| Phil | mike needs a date for 2nite? Any offers? |

The early interventions by two male students set the framework and modality for the majority of their fellow online contributors. The usual power dynamics of a seminar setting, facilitated by the lecturer, were immediately transgressed and became impossible to re-establish. The normative behavior of the group was dictated by their self-characterisation as socializing students rather than learning students. The social rules of group behavior overwrote the more formal normative behaviors associated with sitting in a classroom. The leisure inflection of chat rooms, friends and flames flooded the digital space. The dominant mode of expression in the contributions was flaming, indicating

that students were expressing informal, social aspects of themselves not usually conveyed in classroom settings. In addition, the communication was gendered and sexualized.

Women were involved in this non-sanctioned behavior but were less extreme in their attacks on others. Significantly, as the swearing and drawings emerged, the women absented themselves from the Virtual Classroom and began to discuss the session-related questions in a discussion board area of the (more) managed learning environment. The session seemed to facilitate a dominant mode of communication that may, outside of that setting, be a minority way of communicating among the students. A fascinating feature of this session was the fact that students acted as though they were anonymous users.

Actually, their names came up on screen as they typed in contributions. A few students continued the flaming performance outside of the synchronous setting by sending personal messages to each other via the associated noticeboard area of the MLE.

Phil: XXXXX, despite your clear obsession with my unfortunately normal sexuality, wishful thinking, will not make me turn homosexual... You have already been banned from going swimming at the local pools due to your unhealthy attraction to young and small children, that 8 year old boy was so defenceless, nobody saw your thumb coming. I do understand that the medical problem of u having small genitalia is probably the origins of this fetish, but please, I urge you to seek help. Have that, eat my insult.

This post was made on the course's asynchronous discussion board. All enrolled students could view this post. The behavior commenced in synchronous chat spilled over into the other modes and sites of communication.

There are many significant points of interest in this teaching event. One fascinating component is the role of anonymity and its function in the relationship between gender, technology and performance of a participant's identity in terms of perceived, actual and challenged power. The ability to set an agenda, curriculum and

learning goals is usually located with the lecturer in a higher education setting. This authority is open to challenge and disruption by students in a CMC environment. While such “resistance” may be valued in some models of student-centered learning and seen as a way to “de-school” universities (Illich, 1972), there are consequences for learning and assessment. Even more seriously, there is an impact on other students through the personal attacks of the few. The question is how these troubling interventions in the culture of respect, tolerance and anti-discrimination are managed when using MLEs in classroom settings.

| | |
|-----------|----------------------------------|
| Steve | Danny takes it in the arse |
| Catherine | HOW RUDE |
| Felicity | Nice to know |
| Phil | u love it mate |
| Chris | we are in brighton |
| Hollie | we are in brighton |
| Felicity | so do you chris ... |
| | |
| Hollie | your officially one of them |
| Phil | Dee is a les |
| Trish | always believe iiiiiiiiiiiittttt |

If homophobia and misogyny emerge in a synchronous chat room that is framed by a university curriculum, then what is the role of the teacher in such a setting? If student-centered learning reveals discrimination against fellow students, should such a dialogue be valued as educational in any way? The last contributor to the online forum, Catherine, perhaps captured the scale of the mediocrity and banality when she stated, “This is as interesting as watching pencils.” To find a way to enliven teaching, learning and scholarship on and off line, the final part of our article takes these questions as its focus, investigating the consequences of aligning student-centered learning with user-generated content and the “project” of a university.

UNIVERSITIES 2.0

With the public sector, education, the welfare state – all the big, “safe” institutions – up against the wall, there’s nothing good or clever or heroic about going under. When all is said and done, why bother to think “deeply” when you’re not being paid to think deeply?

Dick Hebdige (1988, p. 167)

Face it: You’re always just a breath away from a job in telemarketing.

Douglas Coupland (1996, p. 17)

The student-centered learning movement has meant that educators – for nearly two decades – have prioritized words like *flexibility*, *experience*, *negotiation* and *collaboration*, displacing the intellectual importance of discipline, integrity, respect, motivation and commitment. Intrinsicly valuing student voices and views without question, debate or challenge has presented a bill. The lives and intelligence of teachers are now seen as equal to those of the students they are instructing. Teachers’ experience, expertise, knowledge and curriculum are dragged down to the level of the basic, the banal and the everyday.

The knowledge of teachers and that of students are not equivalent. Teachers know more. They write and read expansively. They write and interpret curriculum. They set assignments. They moderate and examine. They study, think and translate complex ideas into the stepping stones of lesson plans. Students can perform none of these tasks. Two forces have decentered awareness of these distinctions between teachers and students. Progressivist and liberal politics have celebrated the value of the students’ voice in a form of mock-1960s libertarianism. Concurrently, neo-liberal forces have added the inflective of the market to the educational mix. As Pegrum confirmed,

Western education has become increasingly subject to the economics of the market and the creed of neoliberalism, where the state's overwhelming object is to supply the standardized workforce – that is, human capital with transferable skills – necessary to compete in the ever more globalized knowledge-based economy. (2007, p. 16)

Students now whine at predictable intervals that “we’re paying for this” and even “we pay your salary.” Like obedient shop assistants, teachers ignore the disrespect, the ignorance and the laziness to ensure that the students are “satisfied” and enjoy their “experience” of learning. They are paying for the right to be mediocre at best or to judge and ridicule others at worst. In the context of our accidental class experiment, students believed they were paying for the right to ignore the curriculum, abuse other students and disrespect educators.

Teachers have always been the object of humor and ridicule. Tirades were scrawled as toilet graffiti or through hushed gossip. It was a Bakhtinesque carnival of resistance: the disempowered mocking the powerful. However, this abuse would rarely be delivered to the teacher's face. Respect and/or fear kept a hierarchy in place. The hierarchy and power were based on a fundamental premise that teachers help students learn important ideas, concepts and knowledges that will allow them to move through their lives with consciousness and care. But the starting point of such a journey is that teachers have expertise that students do not. In our current culture of equivalence, as expressed through leisure-based platforms that have moved into education, this view is unmentioned and disregarded.

It is not simply liberalism with lashings of libertarianism and neo-liberalism that has fed the pyre of teacher contempt and encouraged the attacks on fellow students. The user-generated content “movement” – including Flickr, wikimedia, blogs, podcasting, MySpace, Facebook and YouTube – has provided a channel and venue for the emotive excesses of grievance, hostility and insolence against teachers, students and education. More attention must be paid to “situated literacies.” Hamilton described this concept as a “time-bounded interaction between people and texts or other literacy-related artifacts is taking place” (2000, p. 28). It has now become part of popular culture to humiliate teachers and justify this abuse through the facade of social networking.

Educators have been so respectful of other cultures, experiences and people that we have permitted the undermining of the value of teaching and learning. Nearly a decade ago, the remarkable scholar of popular music and popular culture, Andrew Goodwin, recognized the consequences of these “concessions”:

This point was made for me recently at an academic conference where the audience heard from a distinguished panel of journalists and academics, who, as is usual, talked past each other about their work. What invariably happens is that the academic, eager (like me) to find ways of addressing a non-academic audience, make all kinds of concessions to the difficulties and limitations of journalism, eager in autocritique concerning the politics of academic writing, and discuss our yearning to work as or with media producers, and so forth. We are then treated to career histories from the practitioners, who berate the professors for using bloodless “jargon,” without revealing the slightest interest in figuring out why academics use technical language, or what forms of knowledge might be

produced on campus that cannot emerge in a 200-word record review. Because they operate just a little closer to the marketplace than the professors, the critics evidently believe that they are also closer to “the street” (1998, p. 122).

In the nine years since Goodwin published these words, the condition he diagnosed has spread from academic conferences to the worldwide web and popular culture. The concessions made by academics have extended far beyond journalists and into “communities” of bloggers, wiki editors, Flickr photographers and YouTube filmmakers. What has been weathered in the democratic desire to make connections beyond the gates and gardens of the university is recognition that qualifications, credentials and specialist knowledge hold value. Fascinatingly, it is now journalists who complain about their loss of credibility through the “citizen journalist” movement with such “services” as the BBC’s user-generated content team and CNN iReport.

The culture of grievance and complaint about education has also fed into the phenomenon of Facebook. With 18 million users, it is currently the sixth most visited site in the United States and includes more photographs than Flickr. The site makes its money through advertising, selling products to students while they click through the lives and livelihoods of others. The transgressive and transformative purpose of education is corroded through Facebook’s discourse. As in the teaching “experiment” discussed in this article, the blurring of leisure and learning has corroded the respect that is necessary to commence a scholarly journey. Insults are not the basis of either learning or democracy. A recent survey by the Association of Teachers and Lectures and the Teachers’ Support Network reported that one in six teachers had been cyber-bullied (Meikle, 2007, p. 5). Entering Facebook.co.uk, the evidence for this number is clear to

see. It is extraordinary how many groups discuss such topics as “Is XXXXXXXX the worst teacher in the world?” Harassment of instructors has emerged and digital mauling by groups of students is common (Pepitone, 2006). What is stunning when reading the harassment and ridicule of teachers on Facebook is how few teachers have replied to the abuse. Perhaps it is a mark of their self-respect that they do not scan and upload the corrected papers of these students who attack them for their peer group to see their errors and the real rationale for their abuse.

The greatest gift that a life of the mind provides is awareness that we are responsible for our own failures, inadequacies and laziness. The greatest gift that chatrooms, blogs and Facebook provide is the construction of endless cycles of displacement where others – writers, teachers, politicians, boyfriends, girlfriends, (ex)best friends and mothers – can block the knowledge that we are accountable for the decisions we make in our lives. Homophobia is not a legitimate strategy or method for creating an empowered identity.

There is a movement for change in the land of user-generated content. Even Tim O’Reilly, oft-claimed “inventor” of the phrase *Web 2.0*, and Wikipedia czar Jimmy Wales complained about the increasingly abusive nature of the online environment and asked for greater civility. If they are concerned, then the rest of us should be worried. But when they proposed something as simple as a “Bloggers’ Code of Conduct,” the new media site 910am stated that “controlling what people say and do on blogs can only be a recipe for the decline of the medium and the introduction of totalitarianism online” (Pilkington, 2007). The confusion of civilization with totalitarianism signifies the loss of

the former and a victory for those whose “freedom of speech” drowns out the views of others.

In anti-intellectual times, experts have replaced expertise. Freedom of speech for the few has suffocated the rights of the many. But teachers are also to blame. We have gone too far in valuing the student “experience” over scholarly responsibilities to knowledge. We have “facilitated” an unproductive confusion between valuing student views and validating ignorance, discrimination and oppression. Certainly, the arguments in favor of student-centered learning are convincing and effective. However, new technologies cannot automatically create new democracies. They do not necessarily “transform our worlds.” They can reify and reinforce already existing oppressions and inequalities. Instead, teachers need to bring the revelation and the transcendence back to scholarship and learning. This process may not involve new technologies at all but use older platforms to question older modes of prejudice and discrimination.

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