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Traces of self: online reflective practices and performances in higher education

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Abstract

This paper explores issues emerging from the question of how students and teachers negotiate issues of identity, authenticity, ownership, privacy and performativity in high-stakes online reflection in higher education. I examine in particular the notion of traces as both inscriptions and archives. Working online amplifies the destabilising and disturbing effects of compulsory reflection, and the combination greatly complicates the humanist notions that legitimise their use: that there is a 'true self' which can be revealed, understood, recorded, improved or liberated through the process of writing about thoughts and experiences. Online reflective practices are implemented without acknowledgement of the difference being online makes, and issues of power in high-stakes reflection are disguised or ignored. These practices normalise surveillance of students' emotional and developmental expression, and produce rituals of confession and compliance.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to explore some conceptual issues emerging from the question of how students and teachers negotiate issues of identity, authenticity, ownership, privacy and performativity in high-stakes online reflection in higher education. I argue that working online amplifies the destabilising and disturbing effects of compulsory reflection, and that the combination greatly complicates the humanist notions that legitimise their use: that there is a 'true self' which can be revealed, understood, recorded, improved or liberated through the process of writing

about thoughts and experiences in educational contexts. Online reflective practices are imported wholesale from their offline counterparts without acknowledgement of the difference being online makes, and issues of power in high-stakes reflection are disguised or ignored in discourses of authentic self-knowledge, personal and professional development, the improvement of practice, and transformative learning. These discourses are not appropriate to the nature of assessed or otherwise high-stakes online reflection, and the combination normalises surveillance of students' emotional and developmental expression, and produces rituals of confession and compliance. In this paper I explore the notion of traces, which refer to both inscriptions (what traces we can find of gaps, silences or other meanings in language and practices) and archives (the traces we leave behind, as with computer mediated communication). My theoretical approach draws primarily from Foucault, Derrida, and from poststructuralism.

Although there are specific technologies currently associated with online reflection in education, primarily electronic portfolios (e-portfolios) and weblogs (blogs), I deliberately avoid focusing in what follows on any particular technology, and instead refer where possible to 'online reflection' or 'online reflective practices'. Lines between different online environments are constantly shifting and blurring anyway, and a focus on practices rather than technologies offers better scope for exploring the issues of interest here.

There is an emphasis in what follows on policy and practice in the UK, which differs in important respects from, for example, North America or Europe. In particular, the UK's Quality Assurance Agency's Progress Files initiative (QAA 2000, 2009) requires universities to provide structure and support for personal development planning (PDP) for all students. This policy move has resulted in a flurry of interest in reflection, especially online reflection, and institutions are embedding PDP at a

number of different levels, including by assessing it as part of the formal curriculum. This policy is having a major impact on how reflection is perceived and integrated in HE in the UK: “as enshrined in PDP... reflection is now expected to form part of every student’s analytical learning-to-learn armoury” (Clegg 2004, 292).

Discourses of reflection: an array of meanings

Apart from the policy drivers mentioned above, reflective writing and practices are an extremely important element of teaching and learning (and, increasingly, assessment) in many disciplines, particularly those with a professional or vocational focus. This does not mean, however, that there is a common definition of reflection in the literature or in practice. Fendler (2003) draws out four interrelated theoretical threads of the educational uses of reflection: Cartesian rationality, Dewey’s reflective thinking, Schön’s reflective practice, and feminist concerns with voice and agency. She argues that discourses around reflective writing in education are confused and confusing, and incorporate “an array of meanings”, including “a demonstration of self consciousness, a scientific approach to planning for the future, a tacit and intuitive understanding of practice, a discipline to become more professional, a way to tap into one’s authentic inner voice, a means to become ...more effective..., and a strategy to redress injustices in society” (2003, 19). Moon, on the other hand, identifies four slightly different theoretical sources of reflective practices (Dewey, Habermas, Schön and Kolb), but maintains that these are merely “frameworks of meaning” imposed on the “simple mental process” that is reflection (1999b, 93): a purposeful consideration of complex or open ended problems or ideas (98).

My stance is that reflective practices in higher education always produce certain subject positions and power relations which are too often ignored or overlooked. This leaves students and teachers to negotiate extremely tricky practices such as online

reflection and high-stakes reflection without a strong critical awareness of their complexity. Reflection in education is generally grounded in a humanist discourse of a 'true' or 'central' self which can be revealed, understood, recorded, improved or liberated through the process of writing about thoughts and experiences. This discourse underpins the various projects of reflective writing in higher education as described by (for example) Boud, Keogh and Walker (1985), Brockbank and McGill (1998) and Moon (1999a). However, it is problematic for two main reasons: it masks the increasingly invasive character of educational practices which demand confession and self-surveillance as evidence of progress and learning, and it assumes a knowable, malleable yet cohesive self at its centre. These problems are greatly exacerbated by the increasingly common use of online and high-stakes reflection, as we will see.

Raising the stakes: the nature of high-stakes reflection

I group online reflective practices in higher education into four main categories: informal, extra-curricular, low stakes and high stakes. Some students, tutors, lecturers and researchers engage in voluntary reflective writing, primarily blogging, outside the formal structures of their institutions. These practices can be intimately connected with research, teaching and learning but are **informal** in nature. **Extra-curricular** activities, structures or processes are often put in place in institutions to support transferable skills, PDP, and employability agendas. These are usually unrelated to formal coursework, and are often supported by Careers staff, personal tutors or directors of study, or provided as optional and non-supported activities through an institutional e-portfolio or purpose-built PDP system. These activities are both dependent upon and intended to foster self-motivated learners who value reflection and are prepared to invest time in writing about their own progress in an institutionally-provided or -sanctioned digital space (Clegg 2004). The evidence so

far indicates that take-up by students in these initiatives is low, but the rhetoric around these activities will be increasingly heard as universities invest heavily in systems to meet their obligations under schemes such as the UK's Quality Assurance Agency's Progress Files policy initiative (QAA 2000).

Online reflection is often included as part of a course or programme as a non-assessed, non-compulsory, peer-assessed or minimally formatively assessed component. In some cases this '**low stakes**' reflection is intended as a developmental stage towards a summatively assessed project. In other cases it is supposed to be entirely student-led and (particularly in professional education) habitual as students strive to become members of professional communities which prize self-regulation and continuing professional development. In addition, discourses of "effective" or "deep" learning often privilege the ability to reflect and self-regulate as the hallmark of a good student (Nota, Soresia and Zimmerman 2004).

Teachers are sometimes wary of assessing reflective writing directly as it is assumed to be an inappropriate object of judgment or measures of quality (Hargreaves 2004, Hinett 2002), and these competing discourses – to be a good student you have to reflect, but reflective writing belongs outside the academic gaze – may partly account for the many reports in the literature about confusion and modest participation from students (Tosh et al 2005) in low-stakes reflection.

I define **high-stakes** reflection as reflection which is summatively assessed or which serves a gatekeeping function in terms of entry, progression or continued membership of a profession or professional body. The specific rubrics or standards applied to these practices vary from discipline to discipline and course to course, as

do the models of reflection they are based on¹, but they usually involve judgments of critical thought, the application of theory, evidence of growth and development, and the impact of institutional learning on individual practice. I propose the metaphor of high-stakes online reflection as 'mask', and I have identified six (overlapping) genres of mask: performance, disguise, protection, transformation, discipline and trace.

Performance



² Theatrical traditions around the world involve performers donning masks to portray different characters, and Goffman's (1969) work is extremely helpful in untangling some of the complexities of identity performance in everyday life. One key issue documented in recent e-portfolio literature concerns 'conflicting' or 'competing' paradigms – 'positivist' (product-driven, performative, externally assessed, based on externally defined outcomes), vs. 'constructivist' (process-driven, reflective, learner-constructed outcomes) (Barrett and Carney 2005). The model of a learner-centred and -owned process, which is intrinsically motivating and a stepping stone towards lifelong reflective practice, sits on one hand, while on the other are institutional and professional demands for accountability, evidence and the performance of professional or academic identities (ibid). However, in high-stakes reflection at least, the apparent tension between these 'conflicting' paradigms is in fact an intrinsic part of reflective writing. When what is being

¹ for example: Kolb and Fry 1975, Schön 1991, Boud, Keogh and Walker 1985, Gibbs 1988, Brookfield 1995, Moon 1999b, Johns 2004.

² Creative Commons licensed work by Giant Ginkgo, <http://www.flickr.com/photos/giantginkgo/162974551/>

assessed and monitored is the learner's ability to be authentically reflective³, then reflection itself is performative, and claims for the authenticity and intrinsically motivating nature of reflection become part of the performance of a reflective identity which is produced in the complex space of compulsory, high-stakes practices.

Disguise



The idea of a person's 'true self' or, in some cases, their deformity, being hidden behind a mask is an extremely common metaphor in art, literature, popular culture and in everyday life. Power is also often described as being 'masked': "Modern 'power is tolerable only on condition that it mask a substantial part of itself. Its success is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms' (HS 86)" (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982, 134). This intersects with a Foucauldian understanding of the workings of neo-liberal governmentality, where governing power is decentred and located within individuals, who become responsible for their own surveillance (Lemke 2001). Goals of self-regulation, authenticity and personal development are intimately connected with governance, the market, and the creation and control of the professional, but these connections are rarely discussed with or revealed to students, or perhaps always recognised by teachers.

The rhetoric of self-fulfilment and self-awareness disguises practices that are fundamentally prescriptive, being bound, as Hargreaves argues, "within the ethical code of [a] profession" (2004, 200) (perhaps we can substitute "ethical code" and "profession" with "learning outcomes" and "course" here). Rather than being

³ authenticity in learning is a complex and contested concept (Kreber et al 2007). I am defining authenticity in the Heideggerian sense of 'ownness' or 'mineness' – an unmediated orientation to the self (Carman 2009).

diametrically opposed to a performative discourse, as Barrett and Carney claim, learner-centred discourses informing reflective practice in higher education are “easily transformed into the kind of instrumentalism which underpins the increasingly dominant training and enterprise culture. ...learners can be more readily manipulated under the guise of democratic participation and personal empowerment” (Usher and Edwards 1994, 29).

Protection



Protective masks are worn while doing dangerous activities (fencing or welding for example). The deliberate use of what Hargreaves (2004) calls ‘legitimate narratives’ of reflection on the part of students can be seen as a way of dealing with stress and uncertainty, and the sense that their stories and experiences may not be acceptable. My interviews with students are revealing that they generally have a good idea of what is a legitimate narrative within their own context, and are attentive to the signals that their teachers give in this respect. They are also strategic about the extent to which they ‘get personal’ within a high-stakes reflective space, often resisting voicing what they consider to be personal thoughts or experiences.

Transformation



Formal, ritual performances involving masks are transformative in the moment, but may also have a lasting impact on communities and individuals. Yancey argues that “What we ask students to do is who we ask them to be” (2004, 739), and in many cases reflective writing is seen by lecturers as ‘good’ if it demonstrates that a student is able to ‘talk like’ the professional they aspire to be. As I argue in the next section, as students practice writing within compulsory and often highly structured online reflective spaces, their own experiences are shaped and transformed. Furthermore, the personal and professional development agenda in higher education constitutes individuals as particular sorts of ‘subjects-in-process’, for whom no amount of development is ever enough: “All professional workers need to be developed. Moreover, there should be no end to this process - the true professional knows that learning is for life” (McWilliam 2002, p1). The pressure to be constantly developing shapes individuals to meet the market’s demand for flexible, self-regulating workers who will accept employers’ demands for “explicit confessional critical reflection” (Fenwick 2001, 82), and even to internalise these in forms of voluntary self-surveillance and confession, an idea I return to in the last section of this paper, looking at blogging practices.

Discipline



⁴The scold's bridle was used in Scotland from at least the mid-sixteenth century to punish women for talking too much, nagging, or inappropriate speech – it worked by restraining and sometimes injuring the tongue⁵. There is self discipline involved in establishing habits of reflection and reflective writing, and methods of constraint and strategies of self-constraint in high-stakes reflection governing what students can and will say. Furthermore, disciplinarity shapes the sorts of reflection that are desired – demonstrating again that the notion of 'reflection' has many different meanings, as Fendler (2003) has argued.

Trace



⁶ The death mask (the one pictured here is *L'Inconnue de la Seine*) constitutes a physical trace or archive of the person who has died. It is obviously not *for* the person it represents, and nor does that person have any say or control over the matter, making it an interesting route to exploring agency and archive in online reflective practices. Database-driven technologies for *storing* the data produced in online reflection may produce radical recontextualisation of identity. At the same time, as we will see in the next section, the archive constitutes a form of compulsory

⁴ © 2005 David Monniaux; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Branks_dsc05369.jpg

⁵ <http://www.1911encyclopedia.org/Branks>

⁶ L'Inconnue de la Seine, <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Inconnue.jpg>

memory over which we may have little control.

So, drawing on the metaphor of the mask, high-stakes online reflection may offer a narrative of the student's self which disguises their more complicated or perhaps 'illegitimate' (Hargreaves 2004) thoughts or experiences. It may allow or require certain types of performances – for example that of the 'good student', or the 'autonomous learner' – and be constraining, painful, or transformative as the student's voice is disciplined (Foucault 1975) through the analytical interventions of teachers, peers or professional mentors. Finally, it may constitute traces or archives by which a student's virtual face can be captured – with or without their knowledge or consent (Kimball 2005).

There *is* a tension at the heart of high stakes reflective practices: the arguments for assessing reflection assert that it *can* be assessed because it truthfully captures traces of students' developing selfhood, while the practice of assessment itself destabilizes those constructions of selfhood and reveals them to be performances, disguises and disciplines. For instance, Hargreaves (2004) argues that compulsory reflective practices are essentially narrative in character. She claims that: "in producing narratives for assessment students are being asked to produce a story, and... in nursing (and possibly other professional settings) only three 'stories' are legitimate" (199). She identifies these as 'valedictory', 'condemnatory' and 'redemptive' narratives (200). In constructing a narrative for the purposes of assessment the successful student understands which kinds of stories are legitimate, and shapes her words accordingly.

Hargreaves leaves unexplored, however, the question of what the relationship of these narratives to a true or authentic self might be. To answer this, I turn to poststructuralist theory, which conceives of subjectivity and language as intimately

entwined. The poststructuralist subject, online or off, does not choose from an infinite number of possible selves which identity to perform. The relationship between subjectivity and language is symbiotic: "Lives are narratable as coherent in terms of the categories language makes available" (Belsey 2002, 51). These categories of coherence map on to embodied situations: gender, race, class, sexuality and (dis)ability. They also map on to available social discourses and contexts, out of which the subject may construct meaningful identities. Perhaps Hargreaves' legitimate narratives discipline members and prospective members of communities of practice into certain understandings of themselves and their identities. It may be impossible to conceive of 'being a nurse', for example, without reference to the categories of coherence and cultural meanings that 'being a nurse' makes available.

Davies maintains that the poststructuralist subject "is constantly in process; it only exists as process; it is revised and (re)presented through images, metaphors, storylines and other features of language, such as pronoun grammar; it is spoken and respoken, each speaking existing in a palimpsest with the others" (1997, p275). Taking up the metaphor of the palimpsest, though, raises the question: is there an essential self (the 'paper' foundation of the layered palimpsest) which can be revealed through reflection? Or should we ask, with Butler: "what kinds of constructions are foreclosed through the figuring of this site as outside or beneath construction itself?" (1993, 28). We might think of these closed off constructions as 'traces', in the Derridean sense: the (n)ever-present origin, that which is absent and always already unspeakable when we pretend – for the sake of being able to speak at all – that concepts like "self" are clear: "the trace is not only the disappearance of origin... it means that the origin did not ever disappear, that it was never constituted except reciprocally by a nonorigin, the trace, which then becomes the origin of the origin" (Derrida 1997, 61).

Online reflection: layering, authenticating and archiving

Working online amplifies the effects of compulsory reflection in the form of assessed reflective practices, and the combination greatly complicates the humanist notions of the 'true self' and authenticity in educational contexts that legitimise their use. Online reflective practices occupy the territory of experience and selfhood in especially volatile and shifting ways. The notion of an authentic, choosing, reflecting self already brought into question by poststructuralist theory is further destabilized by digital representations, which are like liquid: always in motion (editable, non-material), but often leaving permanent traces (archives). A sense of fragmentation has been shown to be particularly pronounced within certain kinds of environments on the internet, in what Turkle describes as: "a new practice of identity as multiplicity in online life" (Turkle 1997, 260).

However, the internet is not a homogenous whole, but a patchwork of different kinds of spaces and tools, and the ones most likely to be used in higher education are those where online identities are meant to map fairly closely on to offline 'student' or 'teacher' identities and bodies (virtual learning environments, for example). Much as reflection is supposed to authentically mirror a stable, autonomous self, so the "walled gardens" of institutional learning spaces online are supposed to provide the authentication necessary for both learner and teacher to feel sure that others (and they) are who they are meant to be. Logging in, in other words, forces us into certain subject positions (Land and Bayne 2002, online).

Furthermore, students themselves may strongly resist a loss of control they see implicit in the possibility of fragmentation online. Bayne (2005) found that students experience the online self as a threat to the 'real' self, and feel themselves to be invited towards a dangerous fluidity: "without the safety net of our commitment to a

truthful, unitary identity, we might fall permanently into another (untrue) version of ourselves. Identity formation online becomes a performance here, with the risk of the role taking control of the player” (online). Students may therefore commit with extra intensity to ‘authenticating’ the self they perform in reflection online. This authentication may readily take the form of efforts to ‘prove’ their sincerity through what Foucault describes as the ‘obligation to confess’, a possibility that reflective practice makes available and possibly actively encourages (Gilbert 2001). The student may in this case be both ‘penitent’ and ‘listener’, in the terms of the confession (Hewitt, in Gilbert 2001, 202), when they try to gain a secure footing online through confessional reflection, and to be “authenticated by the discourse of truth [they are] obliged to pronounce concerning [themselves]” (Foucault 1981, 58). Ironically, the structure of the confessional offered (or at least pretended at) a mask of anonymity which online reflective practices do not allow. Students are disciplined from without and within in online reflection by urgent demands for authentication.

Such demands may be both tempered and reinforced by an awareness of the permanence or potential exposure of the traces being set down online. Database-driven technologies for *storing* the data produced in online reflection may, in the case of public or potentially public reflection (blogs, for instance), produce a radical recontextualisation, as “digital archives allow situational context to collapse with ease. ...search engines can collapse any data at any period of time” (boyd 2001, 33). At the same time, and regardless of the extent to which it is public, the archive constitutes a form of compulsory memory over which we may have little control: “we do not produce our databased selves, the databased selves produce us” (Simon 2005, 16). As Land and Bayne have argued in relation to virtual learning environments, ‘archival fixity and retrievability’ (2002, online) binds learners to the words and actions of their online past. Like Kimball, I consider this to be potentially antithetical to the supposedly constructivist and learner-centred pedagogies which

underpin much reflective practice, discouraging students from taking risks, experimenting, or expressing uncertainty (Kimball 2005, 454). However, the “institutional appetite for data” (2005, 428) Kimball wants to shield students from is only part of the wider picture of online reflective practices.

A cultural moment

Online reflective writing in higher education, whether publicly visible, limited to small groups of learners, or restricted to just a student and their teacher, is profoundly influenced by wider cultural understandings of blogging and personal disclosure and risk online. As Carpenter contends, “[electronic] environments allow for and even encourage active integration and dynamic interaction, resulting in a mixing of genres and literacy practices that does not respect conventional categories, divisions, or dichotomies, including the border that separates... the popular from the academic” (2009, 144).

Blogging is a genre which privileges individual voice, addressivity, and a blurred distinction between public and private spheres (Walker 2008). We can see in current blogging practices both within and outside academia a convergence of the rise of the concept of personal branding (Peters 1997, Lair, Sullivan and Cheney 2005), and what Scott describes as the “cultural tendency to seek out confessional narratives of self-disclosure” (2004, 92). This convergence exposes a number of tensions: between self-promotion and authenticity, between accusations of narcissism and pressures to confess, and between moral panics around privacy and safety and a growing sense that online invisibility equates to personal and professional negligence, and that the more presence the better.

The idea that the blog as a whole is a reflection of a coherent and knowable self is a powerful one for bloggers (Ewins 2005, Holbrook 2006). As Reed comments, “[bloggers] treat weblogs as straightforward indexes of self; they commonly assert that ‘my blog is me’” (2005, 227). Research is also showing that blog audiences have strong expectations about the authenticity of bloggers. Freidrich (2007) explicitly connects the authority of a blog to its perceived authenticity, arguing that online audiences are especially attuned to cues of authenticity because of the increased possibility of anonymity and deception accompanying online writing. She maintains that, “aware of the constant possibility that a fictional text may be posing as non-fiction, readers online have been exhaustive in investigating suspicious texts” (Freidrich 2007, p63). Kitzmann (2003) links audience expectations of online authorship to Lejeune’s theory of the ‘autobiographical pact’ of truthfulness and authenticity entered into by authors and readers of work in that genre: “web-based forms of self-documentation are so concerned about ...violation [of the autobiographical pact] that “reality” has been almost fetishized” (59). This performance of truth demanded by audiences in this genre can produce intense feelings of personal exposure. Curtain (2006, online) characterises the primary emotion of the blogger as one of anxiety: “Do I updated [sic] enough? Why don’t I write? Who is reading me? Why aren’t there more? What do they think about what I say?”.

Holbrook argues, however, that it is the *assumption* of truth that matters, and that many bloggers play with the pact (2006, 9). As well they might, because at the same time as authenticity takes centre stage in the blogger-reader relationship, a managerial and market-driven discourse of the ‘personal brand’, essential for success in today’s world, provokes a calculating and strategic approach to self-disclosure:

A strong personal brand identity ideally can endure for decades... To be successful, aspirants must adapt to the growing maturity of the marketplace, competitive threats, changes in social mores and values, proliferation of communication channels, and other factors that serve to challenge brand resilience. How frequently and how radically the identity is transformed to sustain depends on the aspirant's sector. (Rein et al 2005, 349)

Change and development is framed here as a market demand rather than a personal need – quite different from, and arguably more superficial than, the pedagogical models of reflection discussed above. The message, however, is the same: change, and be seen to change. The promise (or threat) of a personal brand which lasts for decades has echoes of the archive, but is recast as not only a benefit, but one which can and must be harnessed and controlled by the 'aspirant'. Indeed, Eichhorn argues that the concept of the archive itself is changing as a wave of self-representation emerges: "In blogs and other social networking spaces, the drive to collect and re/present one's self is apparent in a myriad of emerging forms of expression... part of the radical reconfiguration of the archive currently underway." (2008, 3)

There is a growing openness in higher education to an e-learning agenda which positions new digital 'tools' as the answer to market needs, globalisation, and a new generation of so-called digital native consumer-students, without an accompanying critical stance which would support students and teachers to engage creatively and carefully with digital practices and cultures. These tools and environments are neither innocent nor culturally neutral, as they are "inscribed with social meaning, power relations, possibilities for and restrictions on the expression of personal identity" (Goodfellow and Lea 2007, 128).

Conclusion

In this paper I have identified and explored some important theoretical issues impacting on high-stakes online reflective practices. These are: the humanist

discourse underpinning reflective practices; governance, the market, and the discipline of confession and development; the performative nature of assessment, and assessed reflection; masks as metaphors for understanding how students may knowingly perform or (in the case of the trace) be performed in high-stakes reflection; the complexity of identity and authenticity online; archives and the permanence of online data; and cultural understandings of blogging.

There are powerful tensions and traces inherent in these reflective practices. I do not think that these are grounds for criticising students or teachers, or even necessarily making the case that reflective practices should be abolished. Rather, what is needed next is some insight into how people think about, negotiate and transform these complicated issues in practice, and this is the focus of my research as it goes forward. After all, as Youdell reminds us, the trace, or “subordinate discourse” in Foucault’s terms, does yet another piece of work:

[Derrida asserts] that any performative is open to misfire and so might fail or do... something unintended or unexpected. And Foucault’s (1990a) account of discourse insists that no discourse is guaranteed—while particular discourses prevail in some contexts and endure over time, the potential for the meanings of these to shift and/or for subordinate discourses to unsettle these remains. (2006, 515)

High stakes online reflective practices constitute a demanding and invasive form of educational practice. Here the convergence of surveillance, authentication, assessment and reflection exposes students and teachers to a new intensity of gaze and to increased demands for confession-as-performance. Rather than revealing and developing a true and unitary self, reflecting online and for assessment produces fragmented, performing, cautious, strategic selves. As a result, it offers an opportunity to work with an awareness of audience and the development of professional and academic voices. As teachers we need to be able to look critically at these practices and make choices which leave space for us, and our students, to subvert and unsettle the prevailing discourses of reflection in digital spaces.

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