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EDUCATIONAL FUTURES: RETHINKING THEORY AND PRACTICE

# Digital Difference

Perspectives on Online Learning

Ray Land and Siân Bayne (Eds.)



*SensePublishers*

# Digital Difference

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*RETHINKING THEORY AND PRACTICE*  
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# Digital Difference

*Perspectives on Online Learning*

**Edited by**

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RAY LAND AND SIÂN BAYNE

## EDITORS' PREFACE

### DIGITAL DISQUIETUDE

Discussing the manner in which digital culture within education might differ from its 'analogue' predecessors incurs the risk of resorting to increasingly roadworn metaphors of new frontiers, 'cyber' domains, inter-generational conflicts and, inevitably, the futurist utopias and dystopias characteristic of western media throughout the twentieth century. These imaginings now seem to belong to an earlier era of internet thinking, and we are perhaps freer, over two decades on, to re-evaluate digital difference from new perspectives. 'That can only be a good thing;' suggests Gunther Kress: 'it frees us up to think a bit more slowly, with a bit more deliberateness, about which things move at what pace' (Kress 2007).

We have moved on from over-simplistic analyses of 'difference' based on generational determinisms, with a significant literature now available which reveals a far more complex picture of student attitudes to technology. This is one which resists homogenising claims for the existence of a 'net generation' while emphasising the cultural embedding of technology – and in particular social media – within the lifeworlds of students. It also demonstrates a general scepticism among students relating to the value of online approaches within formal education. (Jones et al., 2010; Jones and Healing, 2010; Kennedy et al., 2008; Salaway et al., 2008; Selwyn, 2008).

Despite these more measured and empirically-based assessments of the operations of digital difference, moral panics remain readily available. Carr's (2010) recent work on internet use, for example, worries that our neurological structures will be irrevocably modified, to our detriment, by dependence on search engines, while others, such as neurobiologist Blakemore (2010) have responded dismissively to such suggestions, countering such proposals by emphasising the plasticity of the brain, and pointing out that the basic genetic make-up of homo sapiens has been essentially unchanged for a quarter of a billion years.

As Carr's recent publication and the ensuing reviews indicate, a sense of disquietude seems ever present when discussing new digital practices. And to some extent perhaps it should, as the transformations incurred through new digital practices can be profound, troublesome in nature and far-reaching. Indeed, it is probably true to acknowledge that more or less everything that we encounter will have some effect on our cognitive processes – how could it not? But what is more interesting, for the purposes of this volume, are the opportunities opening up through these cultural shifts, the changes in ways of thinking and the re-invention of conventional practice that digital work seems to be fostering in the academy. It is these which form the body of the work presented in this volume.

CULTURE, TECHNOLOGY AND (ENVIRONMENTS OF) LEARNING

The chapters in this volume had their first airing at the final gathering of the ICE series of international symposia (Ideas in Cyberspace Education) organised by the Universities of Strathclyde and Edinburgh at Ross Priory on the shores of Loch Lomond in Scotland.<sup>1</sup> In his keynote address Professor Gunther Kress emphasised the inevitable and ubiquitous link between technology and culture, however simple or complex the technology. It could not be otherwise, he argued, as our human, social and cultural resources can only go so far ahead of or away from what they are and where they have come from. Culture is, in that sense, he observed 'an inertial force', as are social factors, in two ways. 'First, cultural resources are involved in the shaping of technologies in the first place; in that sense we cannot jump over our shadows. Second, in their *social* settings, that is, culture in the field of power, cultural resources set the field of potential application (and transformation) for that technology'. He also remarked that it is a commonplace to say that technologies are linked.

...while different technologies have their own rationale and dynamics, they are integrated in an environment where everything affects everything else. So for instance, one would not expect the changes in distribution and function of authorship, which digital technologies offer, to be independent of changes in authority, which characterize the much larger level social changes in which the users of digital technologies are embedded. Both must be seen in terms of the effects of changes in power from state to market, from citizen to consumer, which shape the lives of the users of the technologies. (Kress 2010)

The chapters that follow in this collection reflect this complex embrace of culture, power and technology in relation to the learning environment. A variety of significant, often inter-related issues and challenges arise from the topics that they address. These range from social questions of consumption, speed, uncertainty, and risk to individual issues of identity, selfhood and desire, ethical matters involving equity and authority, as well as structural questions of order and ambiguity. From these themes emerges an engaging agenda for future educational research and practice in higher education over the coming decade.

PERSPECTIVES ON ONLINE LEARNING

*Digital Selfhood*

**Cate Thomas** in her striking opening chapter on the Haunted University draws attention to the way in which, given a gradual shift from an 'analogue' to a digital university, the uncanny or *unheimliche* nature of the online world is likely to replace the sense of a stable, fixed and knowable world (albeit perhaps misperceived as such), to one that is shifting and ambiguous. She presents the digital university as haunted in the sense that it affords numerous technological means of constructing the self, and in a witty but faintly disturbing analogy with the restless and unpredictable journey of a stolen letter in Edgar Allan Poe's short story *The Purloined Letter* she demonstrates how email messages, as just one indicative digital technology

employed within the university, have the same quality of 'nowhereness' as Poe's notorious missive. The academic subject is haunted by often hastily written texts circulating through the digital university beyond their control and producing a situation where their selfhood becomes 'clearly unfixed, de-stabilised, split, uncertain and constituted by the readings, utterances and gaze of others'. They lose authority and have little control over their self construction, yet like ghosts cannot 'die', as their spectral selves are endlessly reproducible. Like ghosts also they are 'forced to speak and know in contexts not of their choosing.'

**Hamish Macleod** and **Jen Ross** (Chapter 2) are also concerned with the ambiguity and liminal nature of the online space. They note that in such spaces 'social engagement and hierarchy become less clearly defined' and this in turn renders the teacher's authority online a 'tricky' matter. The same unstructured nature of the digital space that can offer rich opportunities and connections to foster learning and construct new meanings can also prove difficult for the tutor to regulate. In such terrain, they argue, the tutor's role 'is not to regulate, but rather to *participate* and *provoke* in creative and playful ways that open up passages or possibilities in chaotic online spaces'. They explore this notion further through the metaphors of jester, fool and trickster, seeing such potential positionings as a 'frame of mind' or 'approach to being alongside students in challenging, chaotic, digital environments'. Such fool-ish practice offers ways of modelling 'secure not-knowing' and 'enjoyment of ambiguity' as well as helping students cope with complexity and sense-making in environments that are uncertain and relatively disordered. They view this kind of disruptive practice as a form of troubling knowledge that will provoke students to see anew.

Reporting on their experience of being e-learners in a range of digital environments, including immersive virtual worlds, **Maggi Savin-Baden** and **Christine Sinclair** (along with their *Second Life* avatars **Christine Sanders** and **Second Wind**) (Chapter 3) explore the notion that being an e-learning student 'can sometimes feel like being in a silent space'. This seemed to take the form of a 'pedagogical immobility' and sense of 'stuckness'. Drawing on Meyer and Land's (2003) notion of threshold concepts, the authors characterise these experiences of lurking and stuckness as 'liminal states resulting in liminal identities, which for most of the course have resulted in "chronic uncertainty" about ourselves and our relationships to the new environment'. In keeping with threshold theory the state of liminality tended to be characterised by 'a stripping away of old identities, an oscillation between states and personal transformation'. Nonetheless both authors reported progress across thresholds and through liminal states and, interestingly, discovered that their immersive world avatars performed actions in *Second Life* that have led to their real life counterparts rethinking some of the things they do in their day-to-day practice in universities.

### *Transformations*

**Colleen McKenna** and **Claire McAvinia** (Chapter 4) explore the opportunities that digital environments offer for new academic writing practices. Observing that whereas many academic digital texts occupy new sites of writing production, and

often depart from conventional essay form, they remain broadly linear in terms of how they organise knowledge. Their interest is drawn to academic hypertext and how student writers in digital contexts are experimenting with hypertextual forms or how new curricula are making use of new digital writing genres. Through detailed examination of student scripts these authors conclude that hypertextual practice challenges conventional academic genres 'by knowingly disrupting linear organisation and privileging the gaps that such an approach affords'. Hypertext, they find, requires new organisational techniques which displace standard argumentation, relying instead 'on screen design, visual motifs and juxtaposition through linking. From a broader educational perspective this new form, the authors suggest, 'might liberate the thinking of student writers as they work outside of established, and probably internalised, essayistic paradigms.'

The chapter by **Ray Land** (Chapter 5) argues that the nature of academic knowledge is inevitably being transformed in the digital university when its modes of production and exchange employ technologies that operate at the speed of light. Though wary of the perils of technological determinism, he draws on Virilio's analysis of the relation between speed and power to differentiate the changing nature and uses of knowledge in digital environments from those familiar to us from print-based culture. Print culture, he contends, 'in the form of the stable, bounded, individual and private text, has tended to operate within, and to reinforce, patterns of authority and identified authorship.' On the other hand digital environments, 'more protean and restless in nature, tend to be more concerned with image, openness, multimodality and collectivity.' Their increased emphasis on collaboration, group self-regulation and self-explanation may lead to changed academic subjectivity, while technologies that operate in 'fast time' present significant challenges to practices based in the deliberative and contemplative 'slow time' of the cloistered academy.

### *Politics of the Digital*

A new model of the digital academy – based on devolution and collaboration as opposed to hierarchy, traditional authority and exclusivity – is envisaged by **Michael Begg** and his colleagues **Rachel Ellaway**, **David Dewhurst** and **Hamish Macleod** (Chapter 6). These authors however anticipate political tensions between the unfixed and de-stabilised characteristics of digital spaces discussed earlier and the concerns and priorities of accreditation-focused institutions. They identify 'Web 2.0' as, in many ways, 'just the latest challenge to reactionary and authoritative cultures in higher education and, as such, ... an essential part of the academy's lifecycle'. They anticipate that the academy's embrace of the digital will incur substantial challenges, practically and philosophically.

Digital technologies have been a manifestation of globalisation as well as working to accelerate the processes of it. In the chapter 7 **Leah Macfadyen** and **Anne Hewling** evaluate an innovative online programme they offer at the University of British Columbia which encourages international students to make connections between the academic knowledge they acquire in their classes, and their roles and

responsibilities as members of local and global communities. They oblige these digital-age participants to engage personally and professionally with the practical and ethical complexities of global challenges often in uncomfortable and challenging ways. The authors freely acknowledge the programme's overtly political aims and present their students with hard questions concerning whose interests are being advanced over others, and the prospect of changes to social or political structures that already well suit the interests of some established communities. The aim of this programme, *Perspectives on Global Citizenship*, which fully exploits the potential of digital environments in bringing together widely dispersed international participants, is 'to create a forum where students would engage in issues of social and ecological justice through critical thought, moral commitment, and meaningful engagement in their learning and "coming to know" as global citizens'.

As digital environments have become widely accessible over the last two decades, and the social, academic and economic benefits of internet usage have been recognised, debates over equality of access and entitlement have naturally arisen leading to the notion of a 'digital divide' between those able to make use of digital environments and those who are less able to do so. To date the central issue in these discussions has tended to be the question of 'access'. However more recently this notion has been problematised as an over-simplification and in Chapter 8 **Debbie Holley** and **Martin Oliver** seek to develop a better understanding of what 'access' might actually mean to different groups of users. 'The "flexibility" offered by online environments does not solve access issues, they point out, 'but instead adds new spaces (e.g. the home) where these issues must be negotiated'. Their research indicates that even when open access facilities are provided, 'the disadvantaged are not as well placed to take advantage of this as those who already hold social advantage.' Access to digital environments in many ways still seems to replicate the unequal power structures of society.

**Karim Remtulla** (Chapter 9) analyses the potential of digital pedagogies within the modern globalised workplace and doubts their capacity, given the evidence of current practice, to authentically deliver constructivist pedagogy, 'with all its complexity, openness, interpretivism, and multi-dimensionality'. Instead he reports somewhat depressing tendencies towards homogenisation, normalisation and universalisation in prevailing e-learning approaches with adult workers. The pedagogies and epistemologies he encounters in the workplaces of globalised organisations seem poorly to reflect the needs of 'a socially and demographically diverse, multicultural and multifaceted workforce'. Drawing on Baudrillard's notion of simulation he argues that e-learning, as simulacrum, has led to the disappearance of face-to-face adult education and training in the workplace, with the overriding objective of 'efficiency' reducing all adult education and training in the workplace to questions of distribution and access to information, with solutions sought through investment in more hardware and media. He advocates an urgent need for a socio-cultural critique of e-learning that can offer a radical online pedagogy of difference, rather than pedagogies which occlude social and cultural difference.

*A Different Generation?*

**Axel Bruns** (in Chapter 10) explores ways in which digital environments enable students to become active producers of content, often able to do so on an 'ad hoc, on-the-fly basis'. Digital technologies now permit them to 'occupy a hybrid, user-*and*-producer position which can be described usefully as that of a *produser*'. He, too, is eager to help participants develop a more informed, self-reflexive, and critical perspective on their own practices as information seekers, users, and providers and sees this as involving not just the adoption of new digital tools and technologies but a longer-term paradigm shift towards networked organisational and communicational structures. Perhaps most significantly he sees higher education, in its embrace of digital technologies, inevitably facing the same kind of 'casual collapse' as that experienced by other established hierarchies and institutions. Rather than defensively clinging to the status of a centuries-old brand, or dismissing such a transformative cultural shift as a passing fad he advocates a concomitant shift in service role for higher education institutions, focusing more on the quality assurance of both internal *and* external content creation activities.

As an example of produsage **John Cook** and **Norbert Pachler** (Chapter 11) have identified mobile telephony as an area of digital activity in which user-learners are appropriating the technology to construct their own formal as well as informal learning situations. They regard mobile telephony as 'a socially contingent form of cultural transmission and production' in which mobile phone use is not an externally imposed commercial activity operating upon society but rather a phenomenon that is constructed, appropriated and understood by that society. In the examples of learners that they provide their underlying assumption is that mobile phones can be viewed as cultural resources for meaning-making in social contexts. Digital phones as artefacts come with culturally formed ways of usage, they argue, and traditionally learners have internalised set practices through patterns of acculturation. However their case studies provide evidence of learners appropriating the device in practices that are new to them. The authors stress the notion of agency on the part of the learner underpinning such processes of appropriation, in which they claim the technology for their own for purposes of 'identity formation, social interaction, meaning-making and entertainment.'

For some, it is tempting to characterise such appropriation of digital technology by young people for these purposes as the practice of a new generation that is almost naturally technically adept – the so-called 'digital natives'. In their chapter, however, **Siân Bayne** and **Jen Ross** (Chapter 12), seek to dispel such assumptions. They deconstruct the 'native-immigrant' binary opposition embedded within such discourse and challenge the positioning of young learners as subjects that are more comfortably 'at one' with the digital environment in ways that other 'immigrant' learners such as older people or teachers are unable to be. They challenge the primary metaphor of this discourse, pointing out that if the 'inhabitants' of technological spaces are the natives or immigrants, then this constructs the technological environment as the 'nation-state' or the 'landmass', an entity almost impossible to act on, hence minimising the agency and influence of teachers and learners and discouraging dissent. They emphasise the scholarly obligation to critique a shaping

metaphor that is reductive, even racialised and divisive, and which has been glibly marketised.

## CONCLUSION

We hope that the chapters that follow in this book capture something of the challenge and engagement that characterised their initial presentation and debate at the ICE3 conference at Loch Lomond. Our thanks are due to the contributors to this volume, and to the generosity of their colleagues and students in contributing their time, thoughts and feelings in discussion and dialogue about digital difference. We would also like to record our gratitude to all the speakers and participants in the ICE series of conferences held in the United Kingdom between 2002 and 2007 with the support at different times of The University of Edinburgh, Queen Margaret University Edinburgh, Coventry University, the Institute of Education University of London, and the University of Strathclyde Glasgow. These symposia will be fondly recalled as some of the most enjoyable and valuable events of our academic careers.

*Ray Land and Siân Bayne*  
*Scotland 2010*

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.education.ed.ac.uk/ice3/>

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# **DIGITAL SELFHOOD**



CATE THOMAS

## 1. THE PURLOINED EMAIL

*Death, Desire and Academic Subjectivity  
in the Haunted University*

*'I sent a letter to my love, but on the way I dropped it  
Someone must have picked it up and put it in their pocket.'*  
Rhyme from a children's playground game

*'...we cannot say of the purloined letter that, like other objects, it must be, or  
not be, in a particular place, but unlike them it will be and not be where it is,  
wherever it goes.'*

Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter', Jacques Lacan

### INTRODUCTION

There is something uncanny about the Internet. The strange, the unexpected, the disturbing, the unaccountable, the familiar found in the midst of the alien, the alien that penetrates the home; the shocking, the obscene, the eerily beautiful; the sense that nothing is fixed, stable, certain or ultimately knowable, be that personal identity, the online environment itself, or the others with whom one's online self communes – all these classic elements of the uncanny are (un)familiar territory to any regular Internet user.

### THE UNCANNY

Dolar (1991) describes the uncanny as irrupting with 'the rise of scientific rationality' (p. 7) and constantly haunting modernity 'from the inside' (p. 7)<sup>1</sup>; how much more so has the uncanny grown and mutated with the development of our new technologies, so that it invades, haunts and possesses the world of the Internet, the very locus of technoculture. And if, as Poster (2001) points out, the technologies have contributed to the fact that we inhabit a cyberspace situated knowledge economy, then the uncanny is the unwholesome double that haunts that economy - 'from the inside'.

As Royle (2003) discusses in his comprehensive work on the uncanny, Freud's attempt, in his originating 1919 essay *Das Unheimliche* (translated as *The Uncanny*), to make an exhaustive list of all that is uncanny, results in stopping, starting, contradiction and confusion, precisely because it is impossible to list all elements of

the uncanny. Because the realm is by nature inexhaustible and contradictory, any definition can never be complete or completely true. There is always a remainder, the definition has always to be partial. Similarly, any attempt to sum up what cyberspace 'is' necessarily results in failure; being so intimately intertwined with the uncanny, it shares the same characteristics of inexhaustibility and uncertainty.

Freud's notion of Unheimliche always containing its opposite term 'Heimlich' (which translates as the homely or familiar), and the homely and familiar always containing the uncanny, also relates intimately to the experience of navigating the Internet. One may, for example, unexpectedly come across something which is intimately familiar such as an old acquaintance or a childhood haunt when searching the world of the Internet for something completely unrelated; conversely, one may have the opposite experience of 'Googling' oneself (i.e. searching with one's own name as the search term) and finding, not a familiar homepage but the eerie details (or worse still, photograph) of one's unexpected and disturbing double.

Freud describes the uncanny as 'something which ought to have remained hidden but has come to light' (p. 364). One of the characteristics of cyberspace is that nothing can any longer be hidden in the way that traditional print media permits for censorship. The world of the Internet, as those who celebrate its lack of boundaries and democratic access to publication expound, means the end of censorship. An example of this is how any event of significance has an internationally accessible presence in cyberspace within hours, or even minutes. Uncannily, it brings to light that which ought to be – or would otherwise be – hidden.

If the online world is an uncanny space, how does this affect the Institution of the university, as we move from traditional, face to face, ways of working to a mode where online working is central to our activities? The move from an 'analogue'<sup>2</sup> to a digital university must surely be a move from a space which we collectively view (albeit mis-view) as stable, fixed and knowable, to one which is shifting, unstable and ambiguous. This is a domain where radical uncertainty predominates – the shadowy, unexpected, uncertain strangeness of the haunted university.

#### THE ACADEMIC IN THE HAUNTED SPACE

And where is the academic in this haunted space? We are at an historical point when the online 'crisis in authorship' undermines scholarly authority for academics as researchers, as outlined in more detail later in this paper; similarly, a move to social constructivist influenced, student centred, collaborative pedagogic practice undermines the traditional authority-position of the academic as teacher. Against this background the question of who the online academic now is, and how that former ostensibly unified, authoritative pre-digital self is now being overtaken by a less stable, fixed or definable Subject, is key to our understanding of how the digital university differs from the 'analogue' institution.

The last ten years have seen an increasing move away from face to face to digital teaching and learning practices in universities. There has also been a move, gathering increasing momentum, towards common usage of a variety of digital means for communication in the university workplace. Consequently, with

the use of technologies such as email, intranets, online shared workspaces and document management systems, virtual learning and research environments, video-link lectures, instant messaging, blogs, wikis, discussion tools and conferencing software of various kinds, academic staff in universities are more able to teach, and otherwise communicate, from a range of locations without necessarily seeing their students and colleagues. The academic Subject has always been constituted by the sum of their utterances, whether in oral form in the lecture hall, seminar, tutorial and conference presentation or in written form by inscription in books, articles and scholarly journals. The increasing disembodiment of the Subject means that the electronic self constructed through digital inscription, comes to constitute the day to day changing presence of the Subject, and begins to define them. Although there may still be embodied contact with colleagues and students, this Real Life (RL) contact is re-configured by the self created in the electronic environments, as in the following extrapolation from Zizek's conception of the impact of cyberspace on RL.

Zizek talks about the way in which sex with an RL, flesh and blood partner is impacted on by the experience of virtual<sup>3</sup> sex, where a fantasy about the other substitutes for physical contact (Zizek 1998). He argues that this means that when one is engaged in RL sexual practice there are three people involved, oneself, one's lover and the fantasy one has about one's lover, as the virtual knowledge makes more explicit the fantasy that has always existed covertly. We might argue, if both parties have this 'virtual knowledge' that this could be further extrapolated to include the fantasy one's lover has about oneself. Also, to include a narcissistic perspective, the projected fantasy of the self one has, could be included and the projected fantasy the lover has of themselves – making six entities in total! To apply this thinking to the rather more mundane everyday work situation of our academic Subject, we could say that when Dr X meets with Professor Y she is not just meeting with the Y she experiences in front of her, but with the Y that has been constructed through online virtual representation and her fantasised, (through online exchange, memory and the filling in of gaps between), Y. Similarly she brings her own virtual and projected selves to the room, so that the meeting of two people becomes haunted by their other selves. So the online world rewrites RL.

The area of digital inscription in the online university is vast, as there are a range of technologies which invite and permit a variety of ways of constructing the self. This paper will concentrate on one technology, that of email.

The use of email is such a central part of the daily business of work for academic staff in universities, that the *Times Higher Education* magazine carried an article guiding academics on the best way to use it effectively, so that communication would not be in any way confused or confounded and so that academics could represent themselves clearly (Swain 2006).

#### THE ELECTRONIC ARCHIVE AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF SELF

This paper will consider the notion that email exchanges constitute part of an endless circulation of unfixed knowledge, where the impossibility of truth, let alone

clear communication, becomes foregrounded. Within this the academic Subject is constituted in a number of ways: through the permanent, haunting nature of the electronic archive; and through the transformation of distinctions between public and private; and through email chains of signification.

In particular, the metaphor of the way in which the movement of the Purloined Letter in Edgar Allan Poe's short story<sup>4</sup> traces a symbolic circuit will be used, as will Lacan's analysis of this (Lacan 1956). The use of this metaphor will aid us in exploring how the concepts used by Lacan (and subsequent works by others on Lacan's *Seminar on the Purloined Letter*) might usefully help us consider the constitution of the digital Subject in the circulation of email letters, within the context of the uncanny space of online university

In their anatomy or map of Lacan's Seminar on the Purloined Letter, Muller and Richardson (1988) describe the letter as having 'the property of nowhere-ness', being 'a symbol of absence [which] is and is not, wherever it may be' (p. 79) and remaining even when destroyed. The resonance with email is significant – an electronic mail is and is not and is always elusive whilst being ever replicable and omnipresent. But it is its ability to remain when destroyed which concerns this part of our discussion, in its relationship with, or representation of, the archive.

As soon as an email is sent, it exists in a number of places. It may be in the 'sent items' section of the sender's software; it may exist on the server of the sender's email service; it will exist on the server of the receiver's email service; and it will be in the inbox of the receiver's email software, which may mean it has been automatically downloaded to the hard drive(s) on the receiver's computer(s). In addition to this, the email servers will be backed up in some way, so an additional copy of the mail will be held on both the sender and recipients service providers' back-up servers. If either the sent or received email, or both, are downloaded to the sender and/or recipient's hard drives by their email client software, a copy may exist which cannot easily be deleted. (Computer files on hard drives are not actually erased when the user 'deletes' them, but renamed, and then not easily accessible to the ordinary user). So, once sent, it can exist in up to eight (or more) places, seven of which are largely out of the reach or control of the sender. Once the email has been replied to or forwarded, the whole process of copies proliferating begins again. These multiple and distributed copies form an archive, in a literal sense. Additionally, the archive exists in a more metaphorical sense of a kind of total cultural inscription of all utterances.

The electronic self, the self that is constituted by digital inscription, is and is not the Subject. But it cannot die, or, at least not easily. The Subject can die, in the sense of the embodied self expiring, but the digital double lives on. Because digital texts are Subject to archiving in their very creation, in a way that is completely outside the control of their original author, they become immortal. This archiving forces the Subject to live forever, making impossible, or barely possible, the option of death. But the immortal, revenant self, is and is not the Subject; it is the Subject's double, the self constituted entirely by a specific arena of electronic discourse, a self simultaneously outside the control of the Subject, but eerily and intimately the 'spirit' of the Subject: the Subject's digital spectre.

The relationship between archiving, the uncanny and the death drive is a complex and intimate one. Freud's death drive tries to return the organism to its inorganic state and is characterized by repetition phenomena and by destructiveness. This repetition aspect is central to the uncanny. It is about the return of the repressed; it presents as something that has been banished but repeatedly comes back. The uncanny is 'a compulsion to repeat' (Freud p. 360) and 'a constant recurrence of the same thing' (Freud p. 356). It is, however, as both Derrida (1987) and Hertz (1985) have suggested, as noted by Royle (2003), not the actual thing that is being repeated which create the uncanny effect, but the act of the repetition itself.

In *Archive Fever*, Derrida (1995) discusses the intimate nature of the relationship between the death drive and the archive. Because of its destructive properties, the death instinct incites the annihilation of memory and consequently produces the need to archive. The death drive, because it creates the compulsion to repeat, creates the archive – the archive being essentially a symptom of repetition compulsion. But the death instinct, being a principle of annihilation, seeks to destroy the archive. Therefore as Derrida points out, 'The archive always works, and a priori, against itself' (p. 12). The heart of the archive is death.

As discussed later in this paper, the existence of the email archive affects the Subject's behaviour in a range of ways, but there is a specific and direct effect when archiving. The possibility of loss which the notion of the archive opens up creates great anxiety in the Subject; to lose the contents of one's inbox in a work environment is to lose one's way, one's history and one's self; on the other hand, the fact of the existence of the archive brings about anxiety in a variety of ways. This contradiction is neatly illustrated by the autoarchive function which many popular email handling software products utilize. At regular intervals, of perhaps a month, the archive speaks to us saying something like 'would you like to auto-archive your old items now?' Of course, the items are already archived elsewhere, so what it is really saying is 'would you like the archive to which you have access to re-organize itself?'. But this message creates anxiety in the two ways already mentioned. On the one hand we experience fear that the archive will hide parts of itself in a secret location which we will never be able to access. We will never again be able to know our own archive – and so our own self – or have control over it. We connect with the loss of self which the death drive implies. But on the other hand, this explicit reminder of the archive tells us we will be forced to live forever, but in a form over which we have no control. Thus the explicit reminder of archiving confronts us with the contradictions of the death drive and the implications for us as Subjects, constituted by the archive.

To put this another way, when the 'would you like to archive your old items now?' message pops up on our screen, what it is really saying to us is 'You're going to die. And not only are you going to die, but I am going to make puppet representations of you live on, and the world will believe them to be you.' Unsurprising then, that many of us, albeit guiltily, serially refuse the option to archive<sup>5</sup>.

A significant aspect of the archive, discussed by Derrida, which has direct bearing on the role of email, is the way in which the existence of the archive does not just preserve the past but by doing so, impacts on the present. The existence of

an archive of our email correspondence affects our behaviour and thoughts, both when we write or reply to email, and also in other arenas. And in doing this, it changes the future. So the existence of the email archive does not just record, it produces.

How does this affect the academic Subject? Partially constituted by the inscription of all the emails they have ever written and all the emails which have been written or copied to them, all of which remain forever in locations over which they have no control, they are also constituted on a present and future basis by the existence of this archive of the self. A sophisticated user of email self edits continually when writing mail, knowing that they have no control over its publication. The self that is created in the archive is permanent and is there to be gazed at at times, in places and by people unknowable for the Subject. In email exchanges we can never actually see the other's gaze, so we are conscious that we never know what we are for the other and must fantasise what the other's gaze may be. How much more is this insecure position compounded when we have knowledge of the existence of the archive, and the consequent awareness of the completely unknowable nature of the other. For the Subject, then, this knowledge of the archive increases the undermining of the imagined stable self, producing greater levels of uncertainty and instability.

The email archive also speaks to us directly, creating an uncanny effect that echoes Derrida's discussion of the disembodied voice on an answerphone message (p. 62) which asks us to speak to it. When the addressee of our mail has set up an automatic response which tells us that they are, perhaps, on holiday and will not respond to us immediately, we are spoken to by the phantom machinic voice of the archive. 'Your letter has been processed' it says 'your utterance is now inscribed indelibly upon the archive and you will never be able to erase it'. But is not the addressee speaking to us, it is the archive itself. And, in a sense, all of the Subject's letters are addressed to the archive, not to the apparent addressee, because the Subject is conscious of creating their public self in their utterances. So all of our utterances are addressed to death, or to the desire for immortality that the existence of death creates.

The relationship of the archive, both to the death drive and the uncanny, is compounded by the silent nature of the email archive. In its creation it is, like the death drive, absolutely silent. One can imagine, when being physically on a university campus, the thousands of silent messages crossing and re-crossing in the ether, an entire, noiseless, set of discourses, sent by soundlessly chattering servers, congealing as soon as created into the archive. This paranoid, but also fascinating, eerie and uncanny image of silent conversing, leads directly into the next topic of this paper: the idea of the collapse of the concept of a separation between public and private, in which email plays a significant, and in Derrida's view, a 'privileged' (p. 17) role.

#### THE OWNERSHIP OF EMAILS

To return the metaphor of Poe's letter, it is significant that the letter is not stolen, but purloined. That which does not have a clear owner – and Lacan's question of 'to whom does the letter belong' (p. 41) is always in play – cannot be stolen, merely purloined. How much more so than the letter does an email have dubious ownership, particularly an email written or received in a work context. Not only is there the complication of whether the sender or receiver is the 'owner', but the issue of who

owns an item created by a member of staff in the course of their paid employment is also brought to bear – perhaps the employer is the owner? And if the employer is part of the Public Sector, then, perhaps, the State is ultimately the owner. This is further complicated in the context of a university, where academic staff will sometimes own the intellectual property of their work.

So we might pertinently ask the question, within a university environment ‘to whom does an email belong’, illustrated in Email Scenario One below:

**Email Scenario One**

Our Subject, Dr X, sends an email to a colleague, Professor Y. Y sends a response, which includes the text of the original. X then forwards the letter to W, for information, copying in Y. W replies to both X and Y, copying in A, B and C, who proceed to reply to all, adding their own comments.

This ordinary, everyday example of university communication foregrounds some issues to do with the nature of ownership of emails. When Dr X sends the mail to Y, does this mail belong to the sender or the recipient? Similarly with Y’s response to X. In ‘showing’ the compound mail to W has X offended Y’s ownership rights in any way, by publishing the mail to W on his behalf? And has W, in showing the letters to three additional readers, offended X and Y’s rights? Do A, B and C have the right to comment publicly on utterances which were never spoken to them in the first place? If Y’s email contained an original idea which subsequently showed up in a paper by C, would C be plagiarising Y, or would he be building on a discussion in which he, Y and their other colleagues had all played a part? Or is all of this a practical performance of ‘de-authorisation’, started by Barthes’ announcement of the Death of the Author (Barthes 1977 [1967]), continued by Foucault’s notion of the author effect, and by the general thrust of post-Saussurean theory, further dissected by postmodernism, and brought into the realm of the digital by Poster (2003). Poster argues that the notion of authorship is problematised in a very evident way by the democratised shared publishing space provided by the Internet. In a public, digital space it is often impossible to know who is the author of a text, and there are always issues around the authenticity of any claimed identity. The ease with which digital online documents can be replicated and changed leads further to the undermining of author-ity, and this, enhanced by increasingly available technologies for sharing texts of often (seemingly) anonymous authorship, further undermines the traditional autonomous authority of the author.

The only clarity in all of this is that the complex chain of utterances has no clear owner. This leaves the Subject in a position where they are obliged to operate on the principle that email exchange is always underpinned by a radical uncertainty as to whom one is addressing, and to assume that all emails are subject to being purloined. Indeed, given that university mail may or may not be the property of the employer or even the State, the emails may be, by their nature, purloined as soon as they are created.

But whilst the Subject may be, on one level, aware of this, there are nevertheless forces at work which make us feel that we are operating in a private world when we engage with email.

When we delve into our inboxes to read, write or respond to an email, we are in an environment where we experience a powerful sensation of being on our own. We are usually operating in the seemingly confidential space of our own personal computer, at our own desk, in private office space. We compose an email silently, in complete privacy. In the secure box of our computer, the email software is another secure box, within which we write our specific mail in a delimited, defined box (i.e. a window). All of this provides us with an intense sense of privacy and security. The toolset which most of us use is unsophisticated and does not encourage editing, the 'send' button is always, invitingly and prominently, present, and the cultural norms which have arisen around the register used for email text invite informality. So, the overall effect for the Subject is a sense of sending a private, informal note to a specific person – as a colleague summed up the experience 'it makes you feel as though you're writing a note to your Mum, but in fact you're writing to the world'.

So the Subject is situated in the impossible, contradictory position of half believing their utterances to be private but knowing them to be public, and having to inscribe themselves on the electronic world accordingly. As Derrida has it 'email transforms the entire public private space of humanity' (p. 17). And in transforming the space transforms us.

Despite the felt intimacy of email inscription, there is an aspect of the remoteness, impersonality, speed and simplicity of use that encourages staff and students in university settings to send emails to people to whom they would not send printed letters, or would not telephone if email was unavailable. The technology invites this. It makes the email addresses of all staff internally easily available to everyone in a university; it enables the sending of a mail to be quick and simple; and it encourages copying in, replying, forwarding, blind copying and replying to all, by making these options available as suggestions, to be performed at the click of a button. Students will email their lecturers quite casually, and senior university staff receive email communication from staff members who do not know them personally, and would not normally speak to them if this channel were not available. Whether this is democracy in action or a damned nuisance is a question of perspective, but its effect is that it increases significantly the number of occurrences and contexts in which the Subject is invited to speak. And, as discussed below, email invitations to speak are not without a directive element.

An email is forced on the recipient, be they the formal addressee, the one step removed addressee to whom a mail is forwarded, or either of the two varieties of tangential addressee, the public bystander who is copied in, or the secret bystander who is blind copied in. The Subject, receiving the mail, is publicly forced to know of its contents, as the existence of the archive means there is always an audit trail which the sender – or future, unknown others – can easily make public at the click of mouse button. If the Subject is the formal addressee, the sender is publicly forcing a response from them; the Subject is forced to speak, and to write themselves in an exchange which may not be on their terms. Remaining silent is not an option, however unimportant the Subject may regard the received mail, as, in the culture of the modern university, such silence is seen as a dereliction of duty. Additionally, the

timescale within which knowledge of and/or a response is expected is short – in the region of a day or two.

As the speed, ease of use, and culture of email usage invites this multiplication of utterances, an additional anxiety is created for the Subject, in that the volume of email increases and they cannot easily manage to read or respond to their mail. So the anxiety of not knowing, and being seen to be silent when they should speak is added to the picture.

The overall effect on the Subject of this imperative to know and to speak is that they are publicly policed, have aspects of their work time and tasks determined by a random selection of others, which represents an erosion of their autonomy, and are forced to inscribe themselves on the digital university in contexts not of their choosing. It conjures up an interactive, internalised, version of Bentham's panopticon, where all the participants who are being policed simultaneously encourage this policing by participating according to the established Law. But, in a sense, it both encompasses and moves beyond Foucault's re-conjuring of the panopticon in his analysis of disciplinary societies (Foucault 1975). It has the hallmarks of Deleuze's (1992) concept of societies of control, in that computers are the machine technology employed, and a control speaks itself though a strange kind of corporate post-hierarchical levelling. Interestingly, it is not university managers who play the most active part in this entire dance, but those in universities whose roles permit them time to send frequent emails, namely students and administrative staff. As these are two constituencies in relation to whom the academic Subject has traditionally occupied a position of relative power, this represents an intriguing shift in internal power relations brought about by the use of digital communication technology.

Moving on to consider the way in which email circulation creates chains of signification and a strange, sometimes circular movement of unfixed knowledge and meaning, leads again back to Lacan's reading of *The Purloined Letter*. Derrida's (1979) concept that all texts contain a set of mechanisms or 'heads' for reading, with which we read other texts, is demonstrably true for the texts which constitute an email chain. The frequent effect of an answering text in the chain followed by a response or another answer from a different view, gives us a compound text apparently written by a range of unreliable narrators, where the reading of any component section of the text makes us view any other component section in a different light. At the same time, an email is positioned in the same way as the purloined letter, in that its movement around the various actors in the drama establish relationships, and create meaning, which is more than just the text within the letter; this creation of a symbolic circuit itself repositions the meaning of the texts within the letter.

A second example of a typical university email, below, demonstrates a dimension of how meaning can be created by the insistence of the chain of signification

#### **Email Scenario Two**

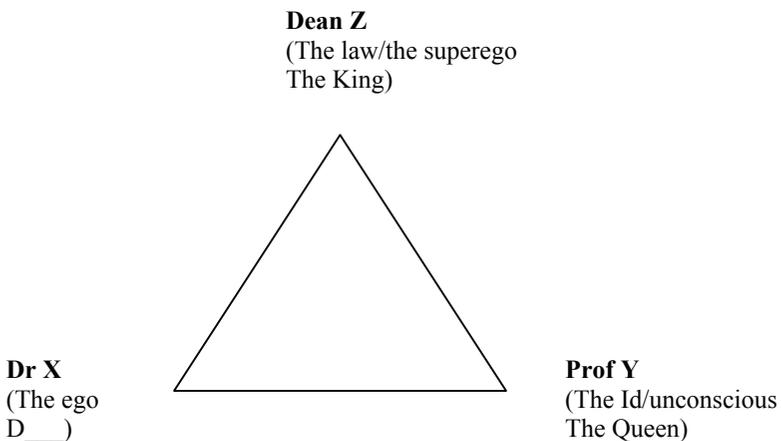
Dr X sends an email to Professor Y subtly pointing out some mistake he has made or mentioning, in a coded manner, something he has omitted to do. She kindly adds that this does not matter because she, Dr X, has helped him by putting right his error or carrying out his neglected task. Dr X ccs the mail to Dean Z.

This email exchange echoes Felman’s diagrammatic illustration of the Purloined letter triads (Felman 1980, pp. 146) which is interpreted according to this context in Fig 1, below. Professor Y’s gaze is that of the Queen who sees that D\_\_ (or X, in this case) sees but is powerless to act; Dean Z’s gaze is that of the King which takes the letter at face value, and sees nothing, i.e. no duplicity. And X’s gaze is that which sees Y is powerless and Z blind, and takes advantage of this to further her own self interest.

In this scenario, the addressee is never the true destined receiver. The mail is intended for Z, and sending it to Y is merely a device for performing the statement to one in a position of power – ‘Y is negligent and I, diligently, bail him out’ – in a way that allows the meaning to unfold without having to baldly state it. Like Felman’s translations of the letter, the email represents the unconscious, with Z occupying the position of the Superego, the Law of the Father, like Poe’s ‘law’ which sees nothing; X occupying the position of the ego who can look at the other’s gaze and look at oneself in others eyes; and Y occupying the position of the unconscious or the Id, where substitutions can be made or acts can be carried out without thought for the consequences.

When we read X’s Scenario One email, from whatever vantage point, we are seeing it in the chain of texts, and we are always constructing our Subject from their text(s). There are concrete echoes in this of Derrida’s (1995) point that the experience of reading conjures a ghost, and the ghostly Subject we conjure is perhaps an interesting metaphor for what the academic Subject is becoming in the haunted digital university.

Where the email actually ‘is’ or ‘is not’ is also of significance in the creation of meaning in/by the signifying chain. In simple terms, the fact that X’s Scenario Two mail to Y is in the Dean’s inbox changes the whole meaning of the mail from a friendly one to a hostile, manipulative one. If Y fails to notice to whom the mail is



*Fig 1. The Purloined Email (adapted from Felman p. 146).*

copied, thus believing the mail to be in a place other than where it is, he will behave in a way vis a vis X and Z which may be damaging to him, much in the way that Minister D\_\_\_ commits political suicide by continuing to act in the same way towards the Queen, because he assumes the letter is one place, when in fact it is in another. In more complex terms, the email is simultaneously nowhere, having no corporeal substance, and everywhere, forever, as it is in the archive. To paraphrase slightly Lacan's comment on Poe's letter 'we cannot say of the purloined [email]... that, like other objects, it must be, or not be, in a particular place, but unlike them it will be and not be where it is, wherever it goes'.

One way in which our email decidedly echoes Lacan's purloined letter is in his point that 'the sender, we tell you receives from the receiver his own message in reverse form...a letter always arrives at its destination' (p. 53). The Subject of the purloined email quite literally receives, from the receiver, 'their' letter in reverse form, in an email chain where it's meaning has been altered or 'reversed'. And, in a slightly different sense, the destination of any email, because of its role in constructing the Subject, is, indeed, the sender or Subject themselves. The destination of an email is always death, the archive and the Subject.

#### CONCLUSION

In summary, then, the academic Subject occupies a position in our haunted, digital university where their selfhood is clearly unfixated, de-stabilised, split, uncertain and constituted by the readings, utterances and gaze of others. They have little control over the construction of their selves, but they cannot die, although they commune with death and the self. They are conscious of the existence of their spectral double, and also conscious that they are that double. Their power is eroded by other constituencies within the university, and they are forced to speak and know in contexts not of their choosing. It is, essentially, a ghostly position that our digital academic occupies.

The previously mentioned *Times Higher Education* article (Swain 2006) warns the digital academic that an email can raise a ghost by becoming 'a hastily written missive that may come back to haunt you.' The ghost it raises is the one which constitutes the self. When that early adopter of institutional electronic surveillance, the Abbess of Crewe, announces that 'The age of the Father and the Son are past. We have now entered the age of the Holy Ghost,' (Spark, 1974 p. 10), she might be speaking of the contemporary university. With the end of authority for academe, we, too, are entering the age of a ghost less holy; the spectral presence of ourselves within the haunted university.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Similarly, Birchall (2001) discusses the way in which contemporary rationality is haunted by conspiracy theories, which act as a necessary excess, permitting the closure of rationality by existing outside it and exceeding it. The Uncanny, I would argue, occupies a similar role as Birchall's conspiracy theories.
- <sup>2</sup> I'm using Poster's (2001) terms 'analogue' to mean that which went before, or is not part of, a world which relies fundamentally on computers and the Internet, and 'digital' to mean that which is part of

that world. These terms are metaphorical rather than literal, and are not here used in their strictly technical sense.

- <sup>3</sup> The term ‘virtual’ for Žižek, in this context may reasonably be taken to mean ‘online.’
- <sup>4</sup> In the narrative of ‘The Purloined Letter’ the Chief of Police, G, visits the narrator and his friend Dupin and asks for Dupin’s help with retrieving the titular letter. The letter in question was an illicit (presumably an amorous) missive, which was being read by the Queen when the King entered the room. She placed it face down, and the King did not notice it. The Minister D\_\_, however, on entering the room perceives the letter and the meaning of it, and substitutes for it another letter. The Queen sees this but is unable to act without alerting the King to the existence of the letter. Possession of the letter, for D\_\_ means political power as he gains influence over the Queen. The Queen asks G for his help in retrieving the letter, but G’s meticulous searching of D\_\_’s apartments in his absence yields no result. Dupin, however, taking up G’s request for help, visits D\_\_, perceives the letter, it’s appearance altered by being inverted and overwritten in open view on a card rack, and on a subsequent visit substitutes for it another pre-prepared identical letter. In the body of the letter he has written a quotation by means of which D\_\_ will understand that it is by Dupin he has been duped, thus settling an old score he has with D\_\_.
- <sup>5</sup> An article called ‘Increasing Outlook user acceptance’ in the February 2006 online edition of Windows IT Pro identifies this reluctance on the part of email users to archive, suggesting technical solutions to the issue. (Joseph Neuberger).

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## 2. STRUCTURE, AUTHORITY AND OTHER NONCEPTS<sup>1</sup>

*Teaching in Fool-ish Spaces*

### INTRODUCTION

As the rules of social engagement and hierarchy become less clearly defined in online spaces (Dubrovsky et al., 1991, Joinson 2002), so authority becomes an increasingly tricky notion in online teaching. In addition, unstructured digital spaces (wikis, live chat, virtual worlds) have great potential as sites of learning, connection and construction of meaning and self (Turkle, 1995), but the teacher's capacity to control or regulate these spaces is limited (Land and Bayne, 2006). Indeed, we argue the tutor's role in such a space is not to regulate, but rather to *participate* and *provoke* in creative and playful ways that open up passages or possibilities in chaotic online spaces.

In choosing to talk about the role of the tutor, what it is that a learner needs of his or her senior colleague in an educational engagement, and what might be changed about the relationship between the tutor and the learner in the online learning environment, we come to our first nonconcept: the definition of tutoring itself.

It is reassuring to find that, at time of writing, the entry 'tutor' in Wikipedia is a hotbed of controversy. The main article carries the warning that 'This article appears to contradict itself' and the reader is directed away to the discussion about the topic on the 'talk' page. Superficially, the discussion seems to be about the differences in the way in which the word is used in the UK as compared with the rest of the world. On closer inspection however, the distinction being discussed is between the use of tutor as an academic rank and as academic role; between who tutors are, and what tutors do. The plot thickens considerably when we consider the term 'tuition'. For some, tuition is what you receive when you engage in an educational exchange with another person. For others, tuition is what you pay, for... well, it is not clear what precisely. All the good words seem to be used up.

The Wikipedia definition of online tutoring, on the other hand, is rather distressingly uncontroversial:

Online tutoring refers to the process by which knowledge is imparted from a tutor or knowledge provider or expert to a student or knowledge recipient over the Internet.<sup>2</sup>

It does have the virtue of being clear. But it is hopelessly authoritarian and instructionist in conception, putting the sage firmly centre stage. The rhetoric is all transmission and content, without the slightest nod to a constructivist epistemology.

Something has to be going on in a tutorial, but if it is simply knowledge transmission then a good textbook would probably serve us better. The notion of tutorless tutorials espoused by problem-based learning enthusiasts helps focus attention here. Something happens in such tutorials that is not dependent on the presence of an authority figure: the tutorial consists of conversations that contribute to building understanding.

So what is it that tutors do, or should do, in support of the online learner? Some have sought to explore and clarify by the adoption of particular metaphors, such as moderator, mentor, or facilitator, to describe the tutor's role. These terms have their value in guiding our behaviour as online tutors, but their force is primarily to warn us to stand aside. The evidence is that too much, or inappropriate, contribution to tutorial discussion by the tutor can inhibit contributions by the students (Mazzolini and Maddison, 2003). The rhetoric of facilitator and moderator speaks of a duty to liberate the students, and empower them to participate in their own learning. This has the ring of critical pedagogy about it, which would seek to remove the authority of the teacher, casting teacher and learner as equal participants in the educational endeavour. Such protestations of equality will ultimately show themselves to have been disingenuous, however, when the imperative of assessment rears its ugly head. Worse, though, is the fact that these formulations guide us about what we shouldn't do, but remain rather silent about what we should be doing.

If the online tutor is going to move from centre stage (King 1993) and sacrifice some ideas of his or her sagacity, what sorts of roles might be taken up to contribute to the guidance of the online learner? There are paradoxes here. We know that distance education (and, by implication, online engagement) is associated with particularly high discontinuation rates (Simpson, 2003; Tinto, 1993) and so it would seem that the online learner will need more, rather than less, perceived support from the teacher. Yet the online teacher has no physical presence to which the online learner can turn, and the nature of time-shifted asynchronous communication that supports much online learning will mean that significant delays must be tolerated between exchanges. In deliberately standing aside to allow the learner more personal autonomy, the online teacher must nevertheless make their virtual presence felt strongly (Garrison & Anderson, 2003). Steps must be taken to counter the remoteness and mediated nature of the relationship.

In this paper we explore the notion of the presence of the online educator as being that of the jester, trickster or fool. To start with, here are some general thoughts about each of these archetypal characters.

#### JESTER

They have ridden like froth down the whirlpools of time,  
They have jingled their caps in the councils of state,  
They have snared half the wisdom of life in a rhyme,  
And tripped into nothingness grinning at fate.  
(Don Marquis, from 'The Jester', 1915.  
<http://www.thenoodlebowl.com/jesters/pages/jesters.html>)

## STRUCTURE, AUTHORITY AND OTHER NONCEPTS

And while the king was looking down, the jester stole his thorny crown...  
(Don McLean, 'American Pie')

Who shall bring redemption, but the jesters?  
(The Talmud)

Court jesters have been figures in European history and literature since ancient Roman times. Jesters in other traditions – Chinese, Middle-Eastern, Indian – have similarly long lineages (Otto, 2001). Though their characteristics and roles are not identical across these traditions, there are some common qualities: irreverence, wit, and a complex and shifting relationship with power. Jesters are irritants in the society around – like the proverbial grain of sand in an oyster. The responsibility of these characters is to poke fun at the established authority, and to ask questions about what would seem to be the obvious, natural order of things.

## TRICKSTER

Tricksters challenge the status quo and disrupt perceived boundaries. Whether foolishly, arrogantly, or bravely, tricksters face the monstrous, transforming the chaotic to create new worlds and new cultures.  
(Smith 1997, p. 2)

Coyote, Raven, Loki, and Anansi are some names the trickster is known by. Tricksters emerge from their many cultural contexts as some combination of magical, powerful, arrogant, challenging, irresponsible, malicious, difficult-to-pin-down, shape-shifting, selfish, frightening and unpredictable. The trickster is a maker of mischief and a creator of tension, occasionally with actively malicious intent, but more often than not s/he (and indeed, ambiguity of sex, sexuality and gender is often a feature of the trickster's persona) is also responsible for the resolution of the tension by fun and foolery (Radin 1956).

## FOOL

Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men.  
(I Corinthians 1:25)

In considering the Fool as a metaphor, there are many stories and ideas to choose from. From sacred or mystical fools, to the 'feast of fools', to the Zen 'beginner's mind' and Shakespearean and other literary fools, fools are characters who provoke new wisdom in others, rather than owning conventional wisdom in their own right. They are tolerated rather than loved by the objects of their attention, and yet their importance is tacitly acknowledged through assumptions of divine protection, commission, or even essence. The irritation that the fool engenders is frequently the source of insights on the part of others; protagonists frequently emerge as sadder, but wiser, following a fool's ministrations.

The fool's mastery is of context (Welsford 1935, p. 5), not content. The trickster stands at thresholds and deals in liminality, and delights in the role of outsider, stranger, other. The jester is both grounded and exposed, and is therefore a lightning-rod for aggression. S/he both challenges and upholds authority, while the trickster is more consistently subversive. As we will see, there is a place for all of these roles in online teaching. They are not easy to sustain – they are uncomfortable and, perhaps, quite lonely. By embracing discomfort and loneliness the teacher-fool can therefore also perhaps gain insight into their students' sense of being lost in online spaces.

By exploring themes and ideas relating to these archetypal characters, we invite teachers to embrace some of the challenges, contradictions and fun of teaching and learning online. What follows is divided into three sections, which reflect the insights and strategies we think the metaphors of fool, jester and trickster offer to online teaching:

- authority, attention and risk;
- innocence, danger and fun;
- complexity, liminality and absurdity.

#### AUTHORITY, ATTENTION AND RISK

First: a story about Anansi<sup>3</sup>, a trickster with West African origins, who is also often found in Caribbean folklore. He is both very clever and very greedy, and once went through many trials in order to be named the 'King of All Stories'<sup>4</sup>. In this tale, he makes it his business to gather up and hoard all the world's wisdom (or common sense) in a calabash. He succeeds eventually, and is looking for a place to hide the wisdom. He decides to hide it at the top of a tall tree, so he straps the calabash to his chest and begins to climb. However, the calabash keeps getting in his way, and Anansi becomes frustrated. A small child observes what Anansi is doing, and calls up to him to put the calabash on his back, instead. Anansi is furious that after all the work he has done, even a small child has wisdom that he doesn't possess. He smashes the calabash, and the wisdom scatters everywhere, so that everyone has some, but no one has it all.

Anansi wanted to control access to stories, and to define everyone's relationship with knowledge, and this is one way of looking at the traditional 'sage on the stage' approach to teaching. Online, though, it is impossible to make authority/truth claims as if in a vacuum; the online space is one where the presence of other knowledge, and the willingness and ability of students to locate and articulate this, is never very far from the surface. And, in a medium that is itself evolving quickly, the tutor is not always going to be able to look like the source of all wisdom. What, then, is the online tutor's role?

A willingness to be the focus of critical attention – and, at times, a lightning-rod for aggression – is part of the function of the jester-teacher. It is possible that in online spaces any type of attention the tutor can attract is better than none at all. The volume of readily available information 'out there', where the tutor and the learner must meet, means that the ability to grab and hold a learner's attention is challenged: "...in an information economy, the real scarce commodity will always be human attention" (Lanham 2006, online). To be impossible to ignore must, at times, be the

tutor's primary goal in entering the noisy silence of the online learner's experience in chaotic spaces. As Roszak (1994) has it, 'An excess of information may actually crowd out ideas, leaving the mind (young minds especially) distracted by sterile, disconnected facts, lost among shapeless heaps of data'. In Second Life, being impossible to ignore may involve donning fins and a wetsuit or a bright red mohawk and, quite literally (well, quite virtually), clowning. In textual spaces like wikis, it may mean being flagrantly provocative, in playing 'devil's advocate'<sup>5</sup>, and in demanding active debate and disagreement from students.

Self-mockery or encouragement of critical attention from students can be challenging for tutors, though. Jesting demands exposure, while traditional models of 'sage on the stage' teaching serve to protect and distance the teacher from personal vulnerability, and, as such, provide little to prepare the online teacher for the lengths to which he or she may wish to go in inviting challenge and attracting attention.

Part of the jester's role has traditionally also been to mock and expose the folly of powerful people and ideas (Peterson 2003, online). However, the jester-teacher who encourages his or her students to question authority and speak truth to power must be prepared for the possibility that he or she will be the first casualty of any student brave enough to take such encouragement seriously. The flattening effect of online spaces, where students are already less likely to perceive the tutor as the source of all authority or respect the boundaries of a traditional, hierarchical student/teacher relationship (Dubrovsky et al., 1991), enhances the likelihood that the jesting gaze will be turned on the tutor. The fear of exposure and loss of authority that could accompany such strategies may be heightened by the teacher's own subject positions in terms of gender, age and ethnicity, for example. Some tutors may feel they cannot afford to allow their hard-won authority to be challenged.

For others, it may be important for them to ask themselves what masking function playing the jester/fool might perform, in light of their unquestionable authority to assess: 'we should not forget that the metaphor of the Jester also implies the use of indirect and subtle ways to achieve desired results. There is a clear idea on the part of the Jester of which results are important to achieve...' (Ashworth 2004, p. 80). Court jesters in history have often been 'learned men' in disguise (Welsford 1968, p. 23), and we do well to be reminded of the layers of identities the tutor as jester assumes. Ellsworth, who has problematised critical pedagogy as being insufficiently attentive to the tutor's own position(s) of privilege, describes a shift from 'dialogue' to 'working together across differences' (Ellsworth, 1989). Such a shift acknowledges social positions and involves everyone – teachers and students – in attending to the circulation of power in their online classrooms.

#### INNOCENCE, DANGER AND FUN

In a story about Mulla Nasrudin (sometimes Nasreddin), a mystic Turkish jester/fool:

Nasrudin sat on a river bank when someone shouted to him from the opposite side:

'Hey! how do I get across?'

'You are across!' Nasrudin shouted back.<sup>6</sup>

Nasrudin's response hints at several possibilities for the online learner: that the place one is may be perfectly adequate; that there is not necessarily a need to rush off somewhere else. This may be particularly the case at times when ignorance is felt most keenly. Moments of not-knowing can be extremely uncomfortable, and extremely productive. The fool embodies secure not-knowing in a way which can serve as a model for teachers and students. Secure not-knowing might also be termed 'beginner's mind' (shoshin), or 'Zen mind':

The Zen way of calligraphy is to write in the most straightforward, simple way as if you were a beginner, not trying to make something skilful or beautiful, but simply writing with full attention as if you were discovering what you were writing for the first time; then your full nature will be in your writing. (Introduction to Suzuki 1996, p. 14)

Students often fear, apologise for, or worst of all, conceal their feelings of ignorance. Convincing the student that it is perfectly acceptable not to know is not just a matter of tolerance and patience – not simply that the tutor should be courteous and unthreatening in his or her questioning. It is a matter of seeing the value in searching for an uncluttered perspective and a beginner's mind. To quote Groucho Marx, 'A child of five would understand this. Send someone to fetch a child of five'. The benefit for the learner of seeking to find nothing strange is the engagement of intelligence in the Piagetian sense of being 'what you use when you don't know what to do' (Calvin, 1996). Attentive, 'childlike' curiosity on the part of tutors and students, and the accidental learning which can result is a gift that being Fool-ish might offer us.

Willeford (1969) writes of confrontations with foolishness which require us to untangle ourselves from our assumptions about the world:

Two Englishmen are riding in a train. FIRST ENGLISHMAN: 'I say, is this Wembley?' SECOND ENGLISHMAN: 'No, Thursday.' FIRST ENGLISHMAN: 'I am, too.' The Englishmen remain placid in what strikes us as their foolishness; they are [not] troubled by their incomprehension of each other... But their behaviour inflicts violence upon our assumptions of what people are and of how they ought to behave... we feel ourselves fooled by the irrational mess that has been made of a conventional conversation; in freeing ourselves from that mess, in which our conscious assumptions about the world have become for a moment stuck, we experience within ourselves the supremacy of the fugitive and irresponsible fool.

The magical force that induces chaos in the presence of the fool often results in a transvaluation of values that could be the beginning of a new order. (p. 110–111)

Good learning is often dependent on the ability to stand back from that which is already known. Alvin Toffler (1970) suggested not only the ability to learn as being central to literacy in the 21st Century, but also the ability to unlearn, and to relearn. Existing classifications of information should not be allowed to prevent us from seeing alternative patterns. Kurt Lewin (1947), in thinking about the challenge of

social change, used the notion of ‘unfreezing’ to describe this need to challenge the obviously true in one’s cognitive structures. Indeed this can be seen in a very concrete way in the scholarship of physics teaching, where it can be shown that the active removal of incorrect, naive models is an important basis for establishment of more useful, predictive models of physical understanding (Hake, 1998).

Perry’s (1970) model of the development of the student’s epistemology suggests that the learner new to higher studies begins with the view that the truth exists, is out there to be known, and that it is consequently the teacher’s job to set it forth, and the learner’s job to assimilate it. The view that knowledge is contested and conditional in all sorts of important ways is often a difficult one to arrive at from this starting point. However, tolerance of ambiguity, and a willingness to let go of the security felt in previous learning, can open doors to the complexity of a subject. Tutors in *online* spaces have a unique opportunity to demonstrate the partiality and situatedness of knowledge, much as Nasrudin does, by drawing parallels with that which is so obviously the case in a physical sense – that each learner is somewhere else, and that much depends on perspective. Even those disciplines which would seem to offer the possibility of certainty and objective truth are full of ‘partially correct’ models of the world which serve us well, and have been reinforced on many occasions. The reasons for this are explored in books by Gilovich (1991), and Piattelli-Palmarini (1994).

There is evidence that individuals differ in the strength of their need for cognitive closure. But there is also evidence that a playful or humorous approach by a teacher in a child’s early years can encourage that child to be less upset by cognitive ambiguity (Tegano et al., 1999). Perhaps it is not too late for the higher education tutor. The jester-teacher, however, must be particularly careful to direct his or her antics away from the audience – to include and involve them without making them targets or demanding self-mockery in return. Even with this in mind, challenging forms of humour, such as satire, can be painful for learners. The actor and entertainer Michael Flanders once said that ‘The purpose of satire, it has been rightly said, is to strip off the veneer of comforting illusion and cosy half truth, and our job, as I see it, is to put it back again!’ Moving away from the comforting illusion and cosy half truth can be a distressing business. Sensitivity and care are needed in order to successfully tutor jest-fully; like juggling or tight-rope walking, there is skill involved. The skill in jesting is to make it look easy and spontaneous, while at the same time being aware of the limits of one’s audience: in other words, not to go too far. The tradition of humanitarian clowning may be a useful model here, one whose principal aim is to calm, heal and facilitate: ‘Most of the time we don’t know what rippling affect [sic] our little silliness has in calming situations and opening doors for others to do their work. We are not attached to results. The play of the moment is what is important’ (Shobhana Schwebke, hospital clown<sup>7</sup>). There is certainly a place for casting the chaos as fun and excitement, rather than threat and danger, in our role as tutors.

The gentle clown also offers spaces for laughter and fun amongst the serious business of learning (Berk, 2003). ‘As a pedagogical device, humour can promote various objectives, such as to increase student interest and attention, facilitate the

student-teacher relationship, provide students with a ‘mental break,’ or promote the understanding and retention of a concept.’ (LoSchiavo & Shatz, 2005, online). In addition, as Berk has found, ‘humour’s primary psychological role is as an emotional response or buffer to relieve physical stress... laughter has been shown to stimulate a physiological effect that decreases stress...’ (Stambor 2006, online).

Space for fun and light-hearted moments can be difficult to provide for in asynchronous interactions. However, LoSchiavo and Shatz found that ‘humour can... help create an online atmosphere that encourages participation, creativity, and exploration’ (2005).

#### COMPLEXITY, LIMINALITY AND ABSURDITY

Unlike the jester, part of whose role is consciously and carefully to ‘speak truth to power’, the fool is often seen as revealing the truth unwittingly, and to the benefit of the audience rather than himself. Shakespearian fools, for example, can ‘test our capacity to hear truth, in slant, peculiar and painful forms, and to use it to take a few steps in the general direction of freedom’ (Edmundson 2000, online). There is much that could be usefully drawn out here about individual fools in Shakespeare: Touchstone, ‘a wise fool who acts as a kind of guide or point of reference throughout the play, putting everyone, including himself, to the comic test’ (John Palmer<sup>8</sup>), and who travels with the protagonists into the Forest of Arden – the place between – where their fates are sorted out; Feste in *Twelfth Night*, both pivotal to, and slightly removed from, the action of the play; and Yorick, the silent Fool, whose absence deprived Hamlet of an usher ‘down the road not taken, a road on which he might have found some measure of happiness’ (Edmundson 2000, online). Generally speaking, though, Shakespearian fools draw attention to the depth and complexity of things, but often in sidelong ways, in minor roles, and rarely for more than a moment or two at a time – perhaps because the audience, once pointed in the right direction, can do much of the work of untangling complexity themselves.

Indeed, it is necessary that we do untangle complexity ourselves. The online tutor is required to be so explicit and so prepared to have the first word that he or she may forget to leave spaces for the necessary work of the learner in constructing his or her own understanding of the material. These spaces can be a gift, and a vote of confidence: ‘In Shakespeare, to have a fool attending on you is generally a mark of distinction. It means that you’ve retained some flexibility, can learn things, might change; it means that you’re not quite past hope... To be assigned a fool in Shakespeare is often a sign that one is, potentially, wise’ (Edmundson 2000, online). The online tutor can often leap in too quickly, and make his or her guiding or clarifying input as soon as a student is seen as floundering. However, the evidences are that contributions from the tutor can lead to what Jean Wood has called ‘premature teacher closure of online learning conversations’ (Wood, 2003). The temptation for the students is to say ‘That’s alright then’ in response to the tutor’s contribution, and to hear the tutor’s input as definitive. When this happens in a face-to-face tutorial it is obvious, and there is usually the opportunity to repair it. When it happens online, it may not be noticed by the tutor until the moment has passed, and the opportunity is lost forever.

On the other hand, and also following the model of a Shakespearian fool, the tutor *should* try to create a felt presence, so that the group, and the individual student, trusts that the tutor is aware of what is going on and is available to help out should it be needed. This may be an entirely psychological matter, or may be assisted by technology. For example, the manifestation of the presence of the tutor online within systems such as Blackboard/WebCT or through some application like Microsoft Messenger, or Skype, may serve to encourage and reassure the student. There is no implication here that the student will approach the tutor's online presence – although this may happen if it needs to – but that a felt presence bolsters the student's confidence to work, and take risks, on their own.

Turner maintains that the wide presence of tricksters in world literatures:

derives from their liminality, the “betwixt and between” state of transition and change that is a source of myth in all cultures (‘Myth and Symbol’ p. 580). As liminal beings, tricksters dwell at crossroads and thresholds and are endlessly multifaceted and ambiguous” (Smith 1997, p. 7–8).

Online tutors, like tricksters, are the guardians of liminal spaces and of states of change and flux. These correspond, perhaps, to Meyer and Land's (2005) ‘threshold concepts’. In the case of all online learners, regardless of discipline, one ‘troublesome knowledge’ (Perkins 1999) tricksters guard may be a practical understanding that there is always a position to take:

Interpreter, storyteller, and transformer, the trickster is a master of borders and exchange, injecting multiple perspectives to challenge all that is stultifying, stratified, bland or prescriptive. (Smith 1997, p. xiii)

The perceived boundaries of the self are more fluid in this medium (Turkle, 1995), and the online trickster-tutor has the opportunity to be present at this threshold and to demonstrate the power of exploring identity as a way of understanding what we hold sacred about ourselves – the sacred as a point of transition, not a starting point, nor necessarily a place of ultimate arrival. For example, we might consider what the medieval Feast of Fools (a day on which ecclesiastical hierarchies were inverted, choirboys dressed up as priests and elected a ‘bishop’ from among their number – see for example Jung, in Radin 1956) accomplishes by reversals and other acts which straddle the line<sup>9</sup> between playful and radical. To perform a reversal or make fun of something in a Fool-ish or trickster-ish way does not necessarily mean that we are dismissing it. Rather, this is about bringing ideas into sharp relief so they can be examined. Self-awareness, reflexivity and the security of being able to recognise one's own position (at any given moment) is a possible reward for the trouble of entering online spaces with an openness to their difference and our own difference within them.

To provoke such exploration is sometimes to provoke fearful responses, and here, also, the trickster has something to offer. Fear can be a useful catalysing force, but:

The important point here seems to be getting to know our fear, examining it closer, staring at it square in the eye – not as a means of solving our problem, but as a way of undoing old ways of seeing, thinking, and feeling.... The ‘trick’

is getting people to keep exploring and not bail out, especially when we discover something is not what we thought or expected it to be. (Sessums 2007, online)

The trickster has the ability to play with and celebrate ambiguity. S/he prefers chaos to order, and such a preference opens up radical possibilities for structuring (or deconstructing) online learning situations. These possibilities fit well with the non-linear, hypertextual/visual worlds in which online learners and teachers find themselves:

pedagogical methods and intentions rooted in principles of textual stability and the dissemination of knowledge among stable, autonomous subjects [are] often at odds with a medium in which both text and subject are liable to metamorphosis, to the shape-shifting which is so much a feature of our lives in the digital realm. (Bayne 2005, online)

One final story. Nasrudin was said to have ascended on three different days into the pulpit to preach, asking each time whether the audience knew what he was going to say. The first time, they said 'no', to which he replied 'What shall I say to you until you do know?', and left. The second time Nasrudin asked, the people said 'yes', and Nasrudin said 'Some of you do know already, what should I have to say to you?', and left again. The third time he asked, and after much discussion, some of the congregation replied 'yes', and some replied 'no'. Nasrudin again left, this time telling them that 'It were now well that those among ye who knew what the Cogia said should teach those that did not' (Borrow 1884, online).

Along with advocating a Web 2.0-style collaborative pedagogy, what is Nasreddin doing here? He may be poking fun at his followers and their desire to give the correct answer. He is also exposing them to absurdity. The ability to entertain absurdity and paradox is an important part of the process of arriving at new insights: old knowledge and understanding must be disrupted and reconfigured by new ideas or information in order for a more complex understanding of a subject to take shape. Piaget saw this disruption as a fundamental part of cognitive growth (Piaget, 1964). He described the way in which new knowledge, incompatible with existing knowledge structures, brings about a state of cognitive disequilibrium, thus motivating the cognitive resolution that follows. Similarly, Dewey (1934) observed that 'equilibrium comes about not mechanically and inertly but out of, and because of, tension'.

We are all inclined to want the safety of feeling sure of ourselves and certain that we have all the answers. Someone needs to come along and prise our white-knuckled fingers off the safety rail, and push us over the side, perhaps with a simple observation: the view is marvelous as you fall. This is what the trickster, fool and jester invite and challenge us to do for ourselves and for our students.

## CONCLUSION

As we have roamed through the territory opened up for us by the metaphors of jester, fool and trickster, we have often found the boundary between what we would wish to say about online 'learners' and 'teachers/tutors' blurring or dissolving entirely.

The possibility that our approach might contribute to some of the ambiguity and surprise that we have celebrated through these characters is both pleasing and troubling. However, we have explored several aspects of what we consider to be fool-ish practice specifically for online tutors. In conclusion, our view is that online tutors should:

- be willing to be the focus of critical attention, and to make themselves impossible to ignore in noisy online spaces;
- support students to question and challenge authority (theirs and others’), but be aware of their own positions of power in doing so;
- model ‘secure not-knowing’ and enjoyment of ambiguity;
- find ways to provide a felt presence;
- allow students to untangle complexity for themselves, in their own context;
- be playful and use humour without making students a target;
- make the sacred a point of transition.

These are not practical ‘tips for teachers’, and nor do we intend them to be. Rather, they represent a frame of mind: a jester, trickster or fool’s approach to being alongside students in challenging, chaotic, digital environments.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The story goes that the title of the book by Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore ‘The Medium is the Message’ was actually a misprint which the authors allowed to stand because they felt that the event (the misprint) contributed to the point they were trying to make, and because they enjoyed its value as a pun. Our ‘noncepts’ word derived from a typo in an email exchange between us while discussing the paper, and has stuck as a way of expressing those ideas that we were trying to grapple with for which no appropriate words or metaphors existed. Judging by the relative proximity of the ‘c’ and ‘n’ keys on the QWERTY keyboard, this was more likely to have been a Freudian Slip than a typographical error, the word striving to combine the spirit of ‘concepts’ and ‘nonsense’.

<sup>2</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Online\\_tutoring](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Online_tutoring)

<sup>3</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anansi>

<sup>4</sup> [http://mythsandtales.com/\\_wsn/page17.html](http://mythsandtales.com/_wsn/page17.html)

<sup>5</sup> Playing devil’s advocate is in itself a challenging notion for many learners, who may, especially in their early years of higher education, be conditioned by what Stewart and Cohen call ‘lies to children’ (Pratchett, Stewart and Cohen, 1999) to expect simple and unambiguous questions and equally simple answers.

<sup>6</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nasreddin>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.hospitalclown.com/InfoPages/What%20is%20a%20Hospital%20Clown.htm>

<sup>8</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Touchstone>

<sup>9</sup> If there is such a line – ludic postmodernism, for example, would suggest that the playful is the radical. See Kellner and Best 1997, *The Postmodern Turn*.

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