

SOCIAL MEDIA IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Case Studies, Reflections and
Analysis

EDITED BY CHRIS ROWELL



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6. Open and Networked Scholarship

#Intermediate #Twitter #OpenEd #HEdigID #DigPed

Suzan Koseoglu

Affordances and Barriers

If you use the Internet on a regular basis, chances are you use social media to connect with friends, family and colleagues, and to dip your toes into the resources and information that constantly flow online. You might use YouTube to learn how to learn a new recipe, contact your family on Skype, check a friend's pictures on Facebook, or join a Twitter chat with colleagues from around the globe. The possibilities social networking tools offer are endless. They change the way we think about ourselves and our relationship with the world. Each tool is designed with certain properties but our everyday actions, the decisions we make with or without intent, constantly change these tools' potential and impact future design decisions.

Network Publics, the notion of public spaces constructed through digital technologies, their capabilities and potential, has created a significant shift in how publics and civic participation are experienced (Boyd, 2010) and has implications that are yet to be fully explored in Higher Education (HE) institutions. One visible change is that it is becoming increasingly common for institutions to open up their teaching and research practices to the public for various reasons ranging from widening participation and better outreach, to marketing. A parallel development, sometimes not so much in line with institutional

visions and practices, is the emergence of *open and networked scholarship* (Veletsianos and Kimmons, 2012). This might sound new or unfamiliar, yet it refers to activities that have increasingly become part of academic practice, such as teaching an open online course, publishing open access, or creating a wiki with fellow colleagues and students. It also includes practices that are not necessarily tied to formal education, such as blogging or participation in a hashtag community. For me, the most exciting dimension of open scholarship is ‘learning with the web and on the web,’ as Gardner Campbell (2015) would say. We learn with the web and on the web, because the Internet offers many tools to think with, to work with, and to further develop our practices. And we further shape these technologies with our habits, intentional choices, with the way we interact with people and information resources — all the things that make us human.

Whilst the possibilities of networked technologies are exciting, there are significant barriers to meaningful participation. The boundaries of teaching and learning have expanded so fast that institutional policies, pedagogic practices, tools, and organisational frameworks are often struggling to keep up with the pace. This is not to say institutional and organisational readiness means we are ready for change too. Sometimes when we are fully up-to-date with a technology and feel at ease with it, it goes through an ‘upgrade’ that make no sense to us, or worse, it disappears and a new one pops up with different functionalities. Sometimes we make conscious decisions to reject technologies because, at their core, they do not reflect the values we have. And sometimes the barriers are harder to describe, or be aware of, because they reflect societal issues that are deeply embedded in the structure and politics of everyday life, such as racism, classism, and sexism among many others.

If we are to *learn on the web and with the web*, how can we respond to the barriers for meaningful participation in a constructive and ethical way and nurture a more inclusive space for all? In this chapter, I explore these issues in the light of the work of scholars who have inspired me and my own professional practice in educational technologies. Most of the discussions in this chapter are based on my experiences and research on Twitter, as this is a platform where I have met many colleagues working on issues related to education and built

partnerships with them; it is a platform that helped me complete my dissertation study and fuelled the energy for subsequent studies. I begin the chapter by discussing how open and networked scholarship changes the nature of academic practice, which is a shift that often creates a tension between professional and personal identities. I then argue that certain literacies we develop through formal education, but mostly through informal everyday practice, teach us how to go about online participation. Finally, I draw attention to power issues in online networks and question the premise of the open as an empowering or equalizing force of change.

Open Scholarship in Higher Education

The affordances of social media, their capabilities and potential, no doubt impact the way we go about professional practice, both at individual and institutional levels. The knowledge produced can reach a much bigger and diverse audience than in the pre-Internet era through online publications, open teaching, and with digital networks of practice. A connected and open platform like Twitter, for example, is often seen as a way to build personal learning networks, which makes it a thriving space for formal and informal professional development through the connections it affords (for an example see the invitation for participation in #HEdigID Twitter chat: a series of chats focusing on Networked, Digital Life in Higher Education, Fig. 6.1). In addition, we also see that scholars are increasingly turning to online networks to voice their concerns on issues that matter to them (for an example see Fig. 6.2). Indeed, Bonnie Stewart (2016) in her research on scholarly practices on Twitter noted that the platform has become a place for scholars who are 'isolated, disillusioned, marginalised, or junior in their institutional scholarship' to have a voice.

Yet, participation in open networks is always personal and negotiated, as Catherine Cronin (2017) showed in a research study on how and if staff at a HE institution engaged in open educational practices. Cronin found that striking the 'balance between privacy and openness' in open networks was a primary concern for most staff, noting: 'many [staff] wanted to avoid mixing streams of conversations about work with other conversations about family, social activities, sports, politics, etc.' The

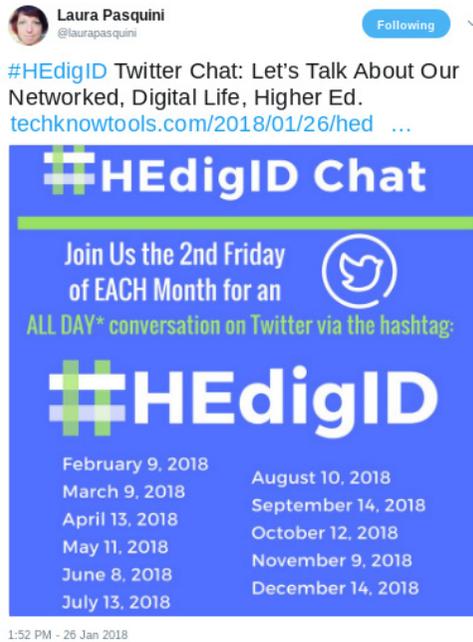


Fig. 6.1 Susan Koseoglu, #HEdigID Twitter chat: a series of chats focusing on Networked, Digital Life in HE (2018), CC BY 4.0, <https://twitter.com/laurapasquini/status/956978197438091264>

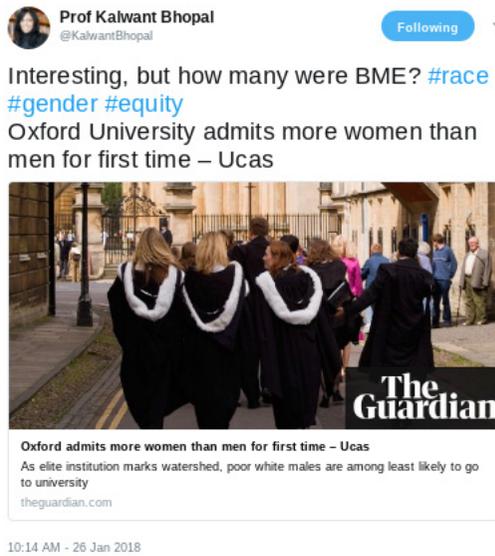


Fig. 6.2 Susan Koseoglu, Prof. Kalwant Bhopal's reaction to an article published by *The Guardian* (2018), CC BY 4.0, <https://twitter.com/KalwantBhopal/status/956923189887754241>

open and connected nature of social networking platforms even pushed some staff to work in closed learning environments, such as institutional virtual learning environments, because they felt safer and protected by boundaries. In my dissertation study, where I explored the different engagement patterns in an open online course, participants also often talked about the time it had taken for them to build relationships and make sense of connections in open spaces. It was clear that open practices like building a personal learning network or participating in an open online course required time, resources, energy, social support and perseverance. But finding the much needed resources, finding the time and energy to stay engaged and build relationships in networked spaces are problematic because open practices often occur outside of formal HE settings. As Maha Bali (2017) argued, most of open scholarship is 'based around volunteering models around people carving time outside of paid work.' Bali further argues that this is problematic and not sustainable because although these practices are important for professional development, often staff do not receive institutional recognition for their time and hard work. It is also true that the emerging venues for academic scholarship (such as publishing in independent open access journals, maintaining an educational blog) may not be seen legitimate paths for academic progression and tenure (in the US).

Going beyond the intersection of institutional and personal identities, we can also question what it means to be a 'scholar' in online networks, because in many social networks, ongoing participation in a community and shared practice define the extent to which one's voice is heard and further amplified. My view is that open scholarship is not, and should not be, limited to academic scholarship only. The academic community should be open to the views and experiences of everyone, regardless of their titles and earned ranks — informal should not mean less valued or less valid. The power of open and networked learning is that they can provide us a holistic understanding of learning that connects the formal with the informal, institutional spaces with community and home spaces. They can provide us a view of learning that connects geographies and the wealth of experiences across different generations and cultures. The pressing questions going forward concern how to create more sustainable models for

open connections and learning, and how to better bridge formal and informal channels which exist on, and are enabled by, social networks. Finding the answers requires certain literacies.

Literacies for Meaningful Participation

Howard Rheingold, a scholar specialising in the socio-cultural implications of digital technologies, observed how students, regardless of their ages, need to have 'social media literacies' in order to make the best of the Internet (Rheingold, 2010). Students, he argued, often lack basic skills to separate the trustworthy from the 'crap', and the skills needed for focused attention, meaningful and purposeful learning online. Rheingold was one of the first to point to the importance of having network awareness in order to become a thoughtful and responsible citizen in a networked society: 'Understanding the nature of networks — technical and social — is essential. Doing so is not just a matter of engineering but also a question of freedom' (Rheingold 2010).

But this holistic understanding, especially the understanding of the social aspects of networks, is largely experiential. Most of our knowledge of the Internet comes from direct experience: unless we use the Internet and are present on its networks (even if that simply means listening to others' activities) we cannot develop a thorough understanding of what it means to be a citizen or a scholar in a networked society. We need to learn *when, how and why to participate* (or not to participate) in online networks, which is often a skill that is developed with active participation in online networks and with the relationships and connections we build on them. A thorough understanding of the 'social' also means an awareness of the ethical, cultural, political, and economic dimensions of social structures. I do not think this is easy to achieve considering the complexity of culture in online spaces, the ever-changing nature of online technologies, and our engagement with them.

But at the very least, as we become 'residents' (White and Le Cornu, 2011) in networked spaces, and as our online activities become increasingly controlled and monetised with social media tools and platforms, we can strive to act responsibly and ethically; we can seek meaningful connections and be on the lookout for the kinds of spaces and tools designed with a lack of sensitivity to people's agency and welfare. I believe this requires a critical understanding of the inequalities

in networked spaces — the social construction of the digital and an understanding of why our response to networked spaces matters. This takes me to the last issue: the misuse of power and privilege.

Power and Privilege

There are deep issues with power and privilege that further complicate open online spaces. Although open practices in education are often posited as way to democratize education and ‘level the playing field’ in HE, there are many inequalities that are perpetuated in networked connections and work to exclude people from participation, especially marginalised and disadvantaged groups and people (this could be due to gender, ethnicity, social class, or disability among others). Bonnie Stewart (2016) notes: ‘On networked platforms such as Twitter, users can lurk without making themselves visible but cannot connect with others without signalling some form of identifiable presence. Yet visibility has drawbacks: as networked platforms are increasingly recognised as sites of rampant misogyny, racism, and harassment’. Visibility also means the tracking, collection and use of participation as data.

Zeynep Tufekci writes about how social media often puts us into a vulnerable position as our engagement with networks becomes monetised through immense processes of data collection and analysis. We want to be seen and to see others in online networks without knowing, or ignoring, the fact that this very basic human desire is in fact tapped into by profit-oriented companies or organizations to make strategic decisions targeted towards gaining our attention, time, and other valuable resources. Critical approaches to education acknowledge that the curation of knowledge (for example, contents of a history textbook), the way in which it is organized and presented, is political; it serves the interests of a particular group of people at a particular point of time in history. The same holds true for the makings of the digital world, as can be seen in a recent interview by Mike Allen (2017) with Sean Parker, the founding president of Facebook:

When Facebook was getting going, I had these people who would come up to me and they would say, ‘I’m not on social media.’ And I would say, ‘OK. You know, you will be.’ And then they would say, ‘No, no, no. I value my real-life interactions. I value the moment. I value presence. I value intimacy.’ And I would say, ... ‘We’ll get you eventually.’ I don’t

know if I really understood the consequences of what I was saying, because [of] the unintended consequences of a network when it grows to a billion or 2 billion people... it literally changes your relationship with society, with each other.

This is a striking comment because it reflects the (perceived) power held by the tech giants and the uncertainty of our future with these technologies, let alone the future of open scholarship. Power might also be held by institutions, organisations, governments and non-human agents, all of which might shape our actions directly or indirectly in open and networked platforms

A critical attitude is needed in any network setting to challenge pre-defined or imposed relationships on users (i.e. how the design architecture wants us to behave) and to reflect on our own assumptions and biases:

- Whose voice can be heard? Whose voice is missing? Who decides that?
- How does the network design impact our connection with others? The way we see them and the way we are seen?
- What is the labour involved here? Whose time and resources are used, and at what cost?
- What is my responsibility?

These are just some of the questions we might ask to better understand and reflect on open and networked scholarship. As Rheingold (2013) says, '[t]he future of digital culture — yours, mine, and ours — depends on how well we learn to use the media that have infiltrated, amplified, distracted, enriched, and complicated our lives and how well we respond to it.' In other words, it depends on how well we claim our citizenship in its complex and wondrous spaces.

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