Social media practices: benefits and risks for doctoral researchers

Andy Coverdale

Social media such as blogs, wikis and Twitter are providing the current generation of new researchers with opportunities for informally disseminating academic content. The diversity of these texts constitutes a wider range of granularity, in terms of academic content, formats and styles (Weller, 2011). In engaging in the production and distribution of such texts – often subjective and experimental – the digitally mediated doctoral student is empowered in challenging the established and regulated processes of induction and socialisation into the research community, typically represented by seminars, conferences and papers.

Researchers are using social media to 'deterritorialise' the spaces of enclosure in research practice (Edwards & Usher, 2008): disrupting institutionally bounded research sites with new discourse communities and networks that are more socially constituted, timely and participative. These digital 'affinity spaces' (Gee, 2004) are enabling informal social engagement with peers and experts through common research interests or activities outside formal disciplines and training structures. For doctoral students from the Humanities and Social Sciences in particular – characterised by 'lone-researcher' profiles – such practices can contribute to the type of 'relational agency' (Edwards, 2008) associated with science-based, collective research cultures.

Free of both the constraints and the assurances of conventional forms of quality control associated with supervisor feedback and peer review, the participatory culture of the academic social web opens up unique opportunities and challenges. Developing coherent and persuasive arguments in less formalised text formats and writing styles attuned to non-specialist audiences can contribute to the refining of ideas, concepts and research foci. And rather than existing in isolation, these digitally mediated texts can be worked interdependently with formal writing, contributing to thesis development and publication opportunities, whilst providing opportunities for feedback and discussion with peers and experts beyond the confines of faculty.

However, it is worth noting that doctoral practices constitute a wide range of academic activities, much of it peripheral to research findings or even what might constitute as work towards the thesis. Reflecting on my own blogging practices and of those I follow, a non-exhaustive list of potential content includes:

- Reports on academic events, including workshops, seminars, conferences and summer schools (including 'live-blogging')
- Book and article reviews
- Commentary on 'academic life' including teaching, internships and research projects
- Research methods and methodologies, and academic writing
- Using research tools and software
- Development of theoretical and conceptual ideas
- Doctoral training and professional development
- Emotional development and well-being related to doctoral study

Sharing such content in the public domain introduces challenges and responsibilities that are not apparent when doing so exclusively and privately with supervisors or trusted colleagues. There is obvious concern that original ideas, concepts, methodologies or findings may not be properly accredited as intellectual property. In some cases, revealing accounts of research projects might compromise formal publishing opportunities, or the confidentiality of research participants. New researchers – especially in their early stages – may risk exposing academic naivety, as ideas, concepts, research foci and even epistemologies are still being formalised.

These and other concerns may account for the cautionary approaches many doctoral researchers adopt when considering sharing aspects of their own research practice through social media. The disparity between the potential of social media in higher education and that of actual adoption and use is both significant and well documented (for example, Conole & Alevizou, 2010). For researchers, risk-averse attitudes prevail, characterised by cautious experimentation. As such, emergent social media practices are variously cast as insignificant, frivolous and egocentric (Weller, 2011). Further to this, so called 'best practices' are heavily influenced by the cultures of disciplines and specialist fields in which early adopters predominate (such as media studies and educational technology), with the risk of marginalising those from less represented disciplines who follow.

For many, academic blogging remains an opportunistic and unreliable activity. The online environment does not represent a 'blank slate' in which academic reputation is earned anew. So whilst new researchers may be increasingly characterised as more digitally literate than their predecessors, the hierarchical influences and reputations of faculty are easily transferred online. Therefore, compared to those of more established academics, student blogs and other sites are often inconspicuous, especially in the early stages of development, and opportunities for quality critical feedback and dialogue are infrequent and erratic.

Group or multi-author blogs provide new researchers with the opportunity to experience blogging without the necessity to resort to the personal investment and responsibility that an independent, single-author blog represents. Institutional or departmental blogs will typically enable contributors to reach a wider audience with greater impact, though they may be required to conform to 'house styles' and editorial control in both content and format, potentially compromising academic freedoms of speech and creativity.

Such initiatives help legitimise blogging and other social media practices as authentic academic genres, though it has been argued that institutional adoption of social media is as motivated by promotional interests than supporting open and participatory scholarship (Bradwell, 2009). Indeed, the emergent academic practices of the social web seem increasingly at odds with the pervasive competitive and managerial regimes in higher education and the overtly neoliberal forms of networking and identity production permeating academic practice. We may need to remind ourselves that academic 'professionalism' can be authenticated via the messy practices of open digital scholarship as much as the presentational gloss of formal research outputs and institutional profiling.

The increasingly active space between self-directed, informal, and independent forms of academic social media, and the more formal, institutionalised interventions represents an area of contestation in the coming years. Academics are increasingly under pressure to engage with wider academic (and non-academic) audiences and articulate the relevance of their research in relation to wider societal issues and prescribed 'real-world' problems. The leveraging of

social media in current impact and outreach agendas has further legitimated the institutionalising of social media practices. In committing to these, we run the risk of privileging output over process, and losing the value of the 'feral' in our social media practices.

References

Bradwell, P. (2009). The edgeless university: Why higher education must embrace technology. London: Demos.

Conole. G., & Alevizou, P. (2010). A literature review of the use of web 2.0 tools in higher education: A HE Academy commissioned report. Milton Keynes: Open University.
http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/EvidenceNet/Conole_Alevizou_2010.pdf

Edwards, A. (2005). Relational Agency: Learning to be a resourceful practitioner. International Journal of Educational Research, 43(3), 168-182.

Edwards, R., & Usher, R. (2008). Globalisation and pedagogy: Space, place and identity (2nd Ed.). London: Routledge.

Gee, J. P. (2004). Situated language and learning: A critique of traditional schooling. New York: Routledge.

Weller, M. (2011). The digital scholar: How technology is changing academic practice. London: Bloomsbury Academic.