MSc in Digital Education: Dissertation research proposal

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A constellation of image, text and sound: exploring multimodal assessment in the digital classroom

Abstract

Advances in digital technology are helping to reshape assessment within higher education. In particular, a shift towards multimodality sees tutors and students employing a growing range of new media when designing and responding to assignment tasks. The digital classroom at once provides opportunities and challenges for tutors. In particular there arises a need to consider how to use and then measure the quality of multimodal assessment. In this dissertation I will take a qualitative approach to explore the multimodal assessment practices within the MSc in Digital Education at The University of Edinburgh. Research questions will include how tutors rationalize the use of multimodal assessment and how they shape assessment criteria in order to judge the quality of artifacts that present ideas across a range of modes. In addition, I will use cross-disciplinary observation to determine whether programme designers and tutors can learn from the assessment practices of colleagues in art and design and architecture where it is the established norm for students to present ideas across a range of modes.

Context and rationale

Prompted by technological advances, higher education assessment is experiencing an age of exploration. Aided by the proliferation of digital media, educators are constructing new learning landscapes and pioneering new forms of assessment. For students meanwhile, years of immersion in media-rich environments means they often enter the classroom equipped with technological skills beyond those of their tutors (Carpenter 2009). Faced with an assignment task, students can demonstrate their knowledge, understanding and creativity through a growing array of digital tools, simultaneously expressing ideas through a range of modes. Wikis, blogs, videos, web essays and other forms of multimodal academic expression are challenging the privileged position of the traditional written essay as the significant assessment method within higher education. The digital classroom is thus being reframed as a place of multimodal learning (Kress 2006) populated by transliterate students (Thomas et al 2007).

Describing the changing educational landscape, and referring in particular to the growing significance of visuality as a component of multimodal communication, Kress refers to a 'new constellation of image and screen' (2006:18). The constellation device is used in this instance to describe the collection or configuration of different modes. In its celestial form however, the notion of the constellation can be used as a metaphor to explore the impact of multimodality upon assessment practices.

First, the conceptualisation of celestial space as a place of opportunity and exploration reflects the opportunities for pedagogical innovation that exist within a multimodal landscape. When setting an assignment task, course designers are able to select the mode (or modes) best suited to the subject in question and the anticipated needs of the student (Kress 2006).

Within these newly discovered (or designed) pedagogical territories however comes uncertainty. The multimodal assessment challenges educators to think newly about how to interpret the quality of ideas simultaneously represented across a range of literacies (Carpenter 2009). Just as the astronomer attempts to establish a relationship between the proximity of different stars, so the tutor has to make sense of the assemblage of sound, image and text. The tutor may have to consider how to navigate her way through a piece of academic work that might not follow the traditional,

sequential form of the traditional essay (Kress 2006, Merchant 2007). Indeed, there is an argument that the tutor performs a role that is more concerned with *experiencing* or *participating* in an assessment that reading text on the page. Julier (2006) for instance refers to 'a change in the rules of engagement between subject and object' when the reader is presented with information mediated through a virtual world (itself, a mode used to the expression of ideas within the digital classroom).

Within this dissertation I intend to consider these questions in relation to the MSc in Digital Education, a fully online, taught masters programme at The University of Edinburgh. The programme makes use of a range of learning environments and encourages students to explore the possibilities presented by digital media for representing formal academic knowledge[1]. The focus of my research will be upon the experiences and attitudes of tutors towards multimodal assessment. Although it is expected that research questions will emerge and evolve during the literature review, I anticipate considering the following themes:

- What rationale do tutors apply when choosing to make use of multimodal assessment?
- What are the implications in terms of interpreting the quality of a multimodal assignment? In particular, how are assessment criteria defined in order to judge the quality of a multimodal artifact?
- How does a shift towards multimodal assessment reframe the role and experience of the marker?

At this stage it is important to acknowledge that although technological advances have prompted a shift towards multimodal assessment, there are long standing traditions in some academic disciplines of students being challenged to present work across a range of modes. Material does not need to be digital to be multimodal (Thomas et al. 2007). Simply, the digital classroom provides greater opportunities to look beyond text as the only means of representation that matters (Merchant 2007).

Art and design and architecture are disciplines that have traditionally made use of the 'crit' as a major method of assessment, an approach that sees students being asked to use a combination of oral, visual and textual modes. As such, those concerned with

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[1] Examples of multimodal work and different learning environments within the MSc in Digital Education can be viewed on the programme promotional website at: http://online.education.ed.ac.uk/environments/

digital multimodality might gain valuable insights from their colleagues within these academic fields. This dissertation will thus undertake observational studies of assessment practices within art and design and architecture at The University of Edinburgh.

It is intended that the research proposed here will be of value to those involved or interested in the use of digital and multimodal assessment, particularly those concerned with online education.

Methodology

Literature review

The first major stage of the project (see Timeline below) will be to undertake a literature review. This will focus on discourse within the fields of multimodality as well as online and digital assessment (including a growing body of research that considers alternative format assessment.) It is anticipated that themes emerging from the literature review will inform the subsequent data collection.

Interviews

The major method of data collection within this project will see members of the MSc in Digital Education course team being invited to participate in semi-structured, narrative interviews that explore their experiences, approaches and attitudes towards multimodal assessment. A small number of questions will be drawn from the literature review, however participants will be given space to describe their experiences and attitudes towards multimodal assessment. In order to stimulate discussion, I propose asking participants to consider examples of multimodal coursework assessment during the interview (the ethical implications of which are discussed below).

Participants will be invited to participate in oral interviews, either face-to-face or online. Although this will necessitate additional time for transcription, capturing oral data could be valuable in disseminating findings in a multimodal way (see below). It is hoped that my positive working relationship with members of the MSc in Digital Education course team will aid the process of negotiating interviews with circa 8 tutors who contribute to a range of different courses across the programme.

Visual methodologies

The second phase of data collection will see interview participants being invited to submit a digital image that in some way represents how they view, understand or conceptualise multimodal assessment. It is intended that a visual analysis, including the use of visual metaphors, will offer additional insights over and above the interviews. The visual exercise will provide participants with the space to explore their own meaning-making through the choice of image content and format. Visual methodologies are growing in significance within research with the value of visual data is increasingly being appreciated (Robson 2011:370). Visual literacy is also of increasing significance within the academy and in particular as a constituent element of multimodal work (Julier 2006). The analysis of images will use Rose's critical visual methodology (2007). Meaning will be determined from these user-generated images by considering the social context in which they were produced.

Observation

As noted earlier, there is an established tradition of using non-text based assessment within some academic disciplines. In particular, the 'crit' is an established assessment practice within art and design and architecture programmes. Observation of these practices – and in particular how tutors measure the quality of work – could offer valuable insights of wider benefit to those involved in assessment. I propose attending classes to observe crit assessment taking place (the ethical implications of which are acknowledged and discussed below). The data collected during observation will be considered in relation to themes emerging from the narrative interviews and the literature.

Dissemination

It is appropriate that the findings should be presented in a multimodal, digital way. The format will be formally proposed within a 2000-word rationale as per programme guidelines. I anticipate disseminating findings using a digital canvas, for instance Prezi. Across this canvas I intend to present ideas through image, text and sound based upon the content to be represented at each stage. While I intend to explore the possibility of presenting ideas in a non-sequential, non-linear and multimodal way (in order to explore the potential of the format in itself), the significance of representing ideas in a way that will allow for the assessment criteria to be satisfied is recognized.

Sample

Although the sample could be seen as being narrow (by interviewing tutors from a single programme) this reflects my aim to undertake an in-depth, critical study of assessment in practice. Furthermore, interviewing circa 8 tutors from the MSc in Digital Education would allow for a representative range of individuals and courses (within the programme) to be covered.

Practical issues and delivery

Digital resources

Interview data will be coded and analysed using *Dedoose*. Visual images will either be submitted by e-mail or via a drop box on a dedicated project website. The proposed dissemination of findings (outlined above) will make use of *Prezi* as well as *Photoshop* (for visual imagery), *Soundstudio* (audio) and *iMovie* (video). I have experience using the proposed software. With the exception of Dedoose (for which a subscription cost would be payable), I have access to these resources without charge.

Human resources including training

In preparing this research proposal I have consulted colleagues undertaking research within the field of multimodality who have offered their support to the project. I have also outlined my intended research with a colleague from the University's Distance Education Initiative who has in turn recognized the institutional benefit of what has been proposed and has offered support in the identification of courses/programme leaders for the purpose of observation. Prior to undertaking data collection I will mark one or more pieces of multimodal coursework, for the purpose of gaining background knowledge and understanding. This will be drawn from examples of work currently available for public scrutiny on the MSc in E-Learning coursework gallery.

Timeline

TIMING	ACTIVITY
November	- Submit draft Research Proposal and ethical declaration - Use feedback from dissertation supervisor to revise proposal and ethics form - Liaise with supervisor and other UoE colleagues over possible programmes for inclusion in observation exercise - Identify colleagues who may be able to offer disciplinary or project specific insights
December	- Begin gathering information for literature review - Make contact with programme leaders/tutors to negotiate assessment observation - Make initial contact with MSc in E-Learning tutors to negotiate narrative interviews
January	- Draft and submit literature review ahead of month end meeting with Supervisor - Arrange interview schedule with MSc in Distance Education tutors - Design interview questions in light of literature research - Negotiate dates for assessment in practice observation
February	- Interviews take place with Distance Education tutors - Interview participants participate in visual research exercise - Commence transcription of interview data
March	- Observation of assessment in practice* - Transcription and coding of interview data - Commence analysis of data
April	- Continue analysis of interview and visual data
May	- Commence write up of findings - Negotiate (with Supervisor) format for rationale for alternative format dissertation
June	- Continue to write up findings
July	- Complete writing up of findings - [slippage time built in]
August	- Revisit content with 'fresh eyes' and make revisions - Proofread including checking references then make final revisions - Reflect on whether dissertation is of sufficient quality to be submitted** - Submit dissertation

*Observation of assessment practice will be subject to negotiation with programme leaders and tutors therefore may take place at different or over an extended period of time.

**It is intended that the dissertation will be submitted in advance of the August 2013 exam board in order to allow for the possibility of participation in the November 2013 graduation.

Additional time required for dissemination using an alternative format My experience of presenting ideas multimodally suggests that this could prove to be a time consuming approach to dissemination. In addition, time will be required for the preparation of a 2000-word rationale outlining my dissemination plans. As such, I am choosing to follow a route that will add additional pressure in attempting to meet my self-set deadline of August 2012. In response, slippage has been built into my timeline (above).

Interviews: access to student work The methodology proposes inviting interview participants to comment on an existing piece of coursework. It will be necessary to gain the author's approval for this piece of work to be considered during the interview process. An alternative approach could be to select a coursework example from the MSc in Distance Education programme gallery, where permission has already been sought for work to be displayed and is already available for public scrutiny.

Observation: convincing colleagues to agree to observation of assessment practices Academic colleagues (particularly those outside the MSc in Distance Education) may be sensitive to observation of their assessment practices. In addition it will be necessary to explore potential ethical issues associated with observing students during assessment. Colleagues will need to be made aware that their assessment practices will be observed, but not assessed in themselves. The potential difficulty associated with observing 'live assessment' might be overcome by negotiating to observe formative or low stakes assessment, rather than summative assessment.

Objectivity in working with MSc in E-Learning colleagues
Although my participation in the MSc in Distance Education programme as a student and research associate offers a number of benefits, care will need to be taken to ensure my objectivity within the project. It is hoped that the preparation of clear objectives for the research (for my own benefit and to be shared with prospective participants) will help to achieve this.

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