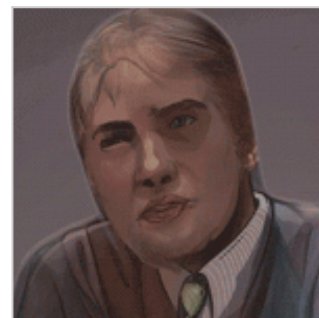


The impermanent landscape of now



11/01/2018

The problem is that what I see today is not what will be here tomorrow. Like watching a river, the water flowing by, it is not only the content of digital streams that is perpetually in beta (Garnett & Ecclesfield, 2011, p. 9), but the whole landscape and territory itself. The infrastructure, platform functionality and nuanced realities of all the different perspectives of *being* in a digital land. As if the river banks are constantly changing. Of course river banks do change, but over hundreds of years (we learn this in basic geography class), the pace of digital land change is what is so radically different. I refer to this as fluid digital ontography. A dictionary definition of ontography is “Geography: A description of, or the branch of knowledge which deals with, the human response to the natural environment. Origin: Mid 19th century (in an earlier sense). From onto- + -graphy.” I think this expression academically encapsulates The Vague Blur of current digital life.

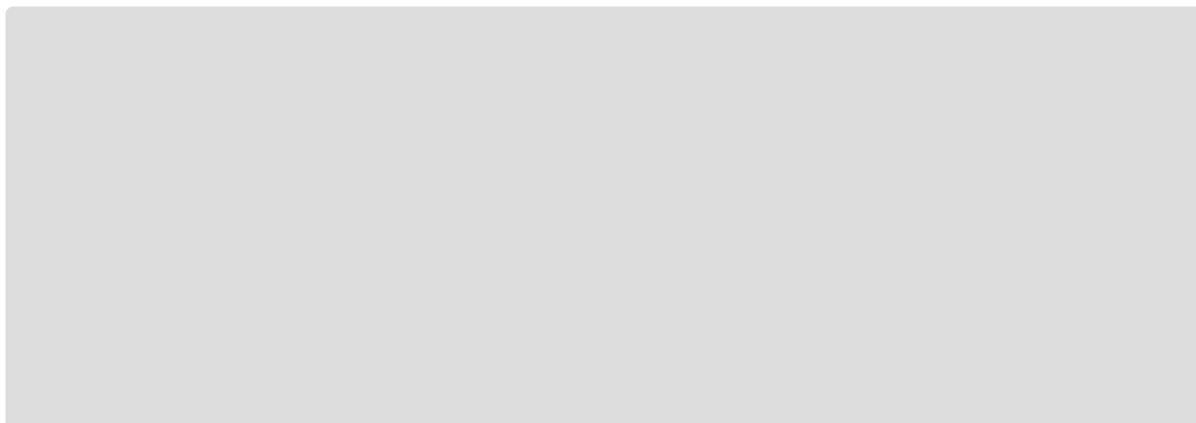
While those in media studies (my favourite being Jose Van Dijck) have been able to see the coming platform society, everyone else – in corporate ICT and education – have been rooted in their own naive slow motion reactions to a terrain that has permanently shifted to a total non-permanency. When Garnett and Ecclesfield coined the expression of ‘perpetual beta’ they probably didn’t envision how prescient that description was. But they were only referring to learner-generated content, not to the whole digital planetary existence.

One of the biggest problems in technology enhanced learning has always been the approach of making decisions on the understanding that what is happening in the present will be happening in a year (or five). So we currently now have touchscreen whiteboards from 2010, we have computer labs from 2005, more recently turning into glorified techy coffee bars (from 2013) – and we (still) have VLEs that resemble websites from the turn of the 21st century. In internet years (think dog years) that makes those websites 140 years old.

The most recent vogue in TEL has been to use social media in the learning and teaching process but this too now has significant potentially damaging consequences. Not only that social media content has changed, morphing into a toxic mix of sofa-speakers-corner and celebrity-get-me-outa-here gossip, but also that the terrain itself has overtly changed. The now predominant *raison d’être* of social networks is that the human quantifiable self has become the product. This means that learning content and behaviour becomes implicitly commercialised via those social platforms. All the data produced by all those interactions makes profit for proprietary organisations who are not beholden to societal policy, only to their shareholders wellbeing and protection. While some in the learning and teaching discourse perhaps still labour under the illusion of a democratised learning utopia brought about by the digital revolution, others are now giving voice to these new ominous signs. Ben Williamson’s blogpost on the unpacking of the socio-technical system behind Class Dojo (<https://goo.gl/Ywdqab>) describes this growing dilemma in engaging and disconcerting detail. His work concerning IBM Watson and Smart Education is also well worth a read.

In the context of my own doctoral research project these ideas are slowly forming into a deep critique of TEL future terrain. I can feel myself withdrawing from the apparent fanbase of technology in learning and moving into an almost luddite perspective of human to human contact being ultimately the preferable method of communication. Maybe the real place of technology for learning is as access mediators and enablers, but never in any central role of automated ‘teaching’ for so called personalised learning on demand.

A final paper I strongly recommend is “The questionable promise of social media for education: connective learning and the commercial imperative”, by Friesen and Lowe (2012). It’s been open on my desktop for at least a week. Providing a damning criticism of the idealisation of tech for learning, it is again very prescient of the times we find ourselves in.



I think these arguments are going to end up forming a basis for my smart learning thesis. In my mind they far outweigh any other core perspective from which to critique findings overall.

Sources/reading

- Friesen & Lowe, 2012, The questionable promise of social media for education: connective learning and the commercial imperative. Journal of Computer Assisted Learning. doi: 10.1111/j.1365-2729.2011.00426.x
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Thanks to <http://objectsinfilm.blogspot.com/mt/2015/04/object-13-scramble-suit-scanner-darkly.html> for the gif of *The Vague Blur (A Scanner Darkly)*.