

Individualized participation in public forms of communication and learning: reshaping contexts in a changing world of cultural products

John Cook

Learning Technology Research Institute, London Metropolitan University, UK

Elisabetta Adami

University of Verona, Italy

Joint position paper

1. Background and rationale

Society is currently witnessing a significant shift away from traditional forms of mass communication and editorial push towards user generated content and individualised communication contexts. These ongoing transformations are characterised by the following (Bachmair, Pachler and Cook, 2009; p. 8):

- a move away from traditional editorial system towards archives such as media platforms,
- a move away from a push to a pull systems of media distribution,
- the use of the mobile phone with a variety of applications as ubiquitous personal media tool,
- user-generated contents and contexts,
- convergence of the above with Web 2.0 tools for the Internet,
- new structures being developed for the Internet media platforms like YouTube, Flickr and MySpace.

These structural changes to mass communication also affect the agency of the user and their relationship with traditional and new media. Indeed, in this paper we will propose that users are now actively engaged in shaping or generating their own forms of individualised participation to public contexts of communication *by accessing and transforming the cultural products that are available within new media platforms and the Internet* (Cook, 2009a).

Mass media is witnessing a trend where the ‘user’ can generate their own content with a mobile phone or other digital device in the form of pictures or video clips; they can then go on to publish them almost immediately on the Internet via media platforms like Flickr (for annotated photographs), Twitter (for micro blogs or ‘diary like’ social messages that are no longer than 140 characters), FaceBook (a social networking site) or YouTube (for video clips). More specifically, our media landscape is now encompassing more and more media which enable participants to generate and (publicly) share their own content. There is often a discourse surrounding this content in the form of comments or discussion. Consequently, we are proposing that what society is seeing now is a more and more ‘individualized participation in public forms of communication’.

It is interesting to note the response of traditional media organisations. Many have been slow to respond whilst others have begun to adapt. For example, the BBC has traditionally acted as being ‘in editorial control’: commissioning programmes and

broadcasting them through a predefined schedule that is transmitted on television. Now, the introduction of the BBC's 'iPlayer' allows an individual to create their own programme of entertainment that has been broadcast recently and that can be watched outside normal schedule time. The user is free to watch this at a time and to a schedule that they define. This change in traditional mass communication provision of content can be linked to the emergence of Web-based platforms like YouTube, where video-content can be accessed, selected, watched and shared by the user at will, according to their interests.

2. Changed contexts, changed agencies in/of contexts

From our perspective, context is defined by the situation/setting in which communication takes place; it is an emergent property of communication (and learning) which is defined by structures, agency and practices (Pachler, Bachmair, Cook and Kress, in press). The location/context of mass communication had already been individualized with the shift from – say – cinema to TV, and when TV, from being watched in public places (bars, pubs etc.), entered the houses and started to be watched privately. When this happened, the location/context was much less social and started to become individualized. However, at that time only the *fruition* of contents had an individualized/private context (while the content given at this time was socially pre-determined by editorial push). Today, not only what can be watched at a particular time can be chosen by the individuals, but also the *provision* of content is individualized and enters the public sphere/context.

Hence we propose that we are witnessing user generated content as a further adjunct to this trend towards individualized participation in public forms of communication. Today, what is 'standardised' is the media site or platform (e.g. YouTube), which provides the 'structure' - i.e. what communicators can or cannot do (an element of the context which is not individualized but is given by a corporation); yet, what users do with these affordances (by appropriating them) of the structure generates unexpected practices which are driven by the users' differentiated interests.

3. A challenge for education

If, following Vygotsky (1930/ 1978), we conceive of learning as a mode of appropriation through the socially negotiated internalization of cultural products, whilst acknowledging that learners are increasingly using digital interactions as a key part of their social networking, we suggest that not enough is known about how to effectively design learning activities that are pedagogically effective at embedding digital technologies and these individualised participation and communication contexts. Specifically, we suggest that there is a need for answers to this question in a diverse set of perspectives: *how do educators balance digital interactions like those used in social networking with authentic learning tasks?*

4. User-generated content: changes in text production

Furthermore, we take the view that citizens are now 'content producers' who are part of an explosion of activity in the area of user-generated content that we mentioned above.

Recent studies by the authors on forms of text production in digital environments (Adami 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2009d; Adami and Kress 2009; Kress and Adami 2009;

Pachler and Adami 2009) show that user-generated content is mainly produced through a process of copy-and-paste, that is to say, through selection and transformation of (snippets of) other texts/artefacts which are assembled into new texts and recontextualized in other contexts. This happens when capturing events in photos and videos with mobile devices which are then uploaded on the Web, or when forwarding selected artefacts, such as snippets of written texts, web links, photos and videos by email or on social network platforms.

When text production is mainly made through selection, assemblage and recontextualization, traditional patterns of coherence (Beaugrande and Dressler, 1981; Fairclough, 1992; Halliday and Hasan, 1976; van Dijk, 1985) start to dissolve and scatter, both within a so-produced text (i.e., between a given snippet of text and its context) and between the text and its context (i.e., the semiotic environment in which the text is forwarded/recontextualized). This has consequences in terms of changes in the acceptability of (in)coherence standards in ordinary communication.

5. Learning and education in a changed media landscape

But is there a direct relationship between user-generated content and learning? Undoubtedly this may be true in certain disciplines like music and media studies, for example, but this link may seem tenuous in other subject areas. However, teachers in all disciplines often lament the lack of coherence of students' essays produced through the copy-and-paste of texts selected from the Web.

If we see this lack of coherence as the result of the students' application/transfer in the educational contexts of new forms of communication and text production in non-educational/informal contexts, we can then see the effects that the changes in semiosis in informal contexts have on a wider range of educational domains and disciplines.

If text production through copy-and-paste is widespread in 'ordinary' communication (especially, but not exclusively in digital environments) and if this results in new acceptability standards in terms of (traditionally considered) incoherent texts and exchanges, educational contexts should start to redefine their notion of 'literacy' or of 'competent communicator' in all domains and disciplines. In other words, if incoherent texts and incoherent texts-in-contexts work successfully outside school, what acceptability standards should be taught in schools? Even more significantly, if texts outside school are more and more produced through selection and recontextualization, shouldn't literacy education include new types of abilities, such as that of knowing and evaluating what is selected, and designing how it is assembled for which context?

These for us are truly open questions, the answers to which need to be given by educators themselves. However, we believe that there is a strong need of investigating the afore cited ongoing changes in communication and semiosis (i.e., text production), and the questions that these raise for educators.

6. From user generated content to Learner Generated Context

Moreover, tapping into the self-motivation of the user generated content phenomenon could potentially have a positive impact on education. Furthermore, failing to explore how more formal educational institutions can cope with the more informal communicative approaches to digital interactions that new generations of learners seemingly possess could lead to a schism if not planned for. Consequently, Cook

(Cook, 2007a; Cook 2007b; Cook, 2009a; Cook. 2009b) has proposed that Learner Generated Context and not ‘merely’ the generation of content is a more generic way to conceptualize pedagogically effective ways to design learning activities that embed digital interactions.

As we have pointed out above, within this mass media trend towards user generated content, society is also seeing the emergence of what has been termed Learner Generated Context. Learning as a process of meaning-making occurs through acts of communication, which take place within rapidly changing socio-cultural, mass communication and technological structures that we have briefly outlined above. One visible structural feature is the prevalence of mobile media such as mobile phones, mini mobile PCs, iPods etc. Specifically, Learner Generated Context can be defined as a

“...context ‘created by people interacting together with a common, self-defined or negotiated learning goal’. The key aspect of learner-generated contexts is that they are generated through the enterprise of those who would previously have been consumers in a context created for them” (LGC Wiki, 2007).

Furthermore, earlier work (Cook, 2007a, 2007b) has provided a more specialised definition of a mobile Learner Generated Context (LGC), which we propose can be seen as socio-cultural learning activity

“conducted by learners who may be communicating or individually reflecting ‘on the move’ and who, in the course of a dialogue with another person or interaction with multimedia resources, raise questions that create a context; when an answer to this context-based question is generated this can give rise to knowledge.” (Cook, 2007a, 2007b)

7. Implications: Questions for researchers and educators

The ultimate contribution of this paper consists in investigating – and addressing researchers with – the following questions:

- What relationship is there between user-generated content, user-generated contexts and learning?
- How can educational institutions cope with the more informal communicative approaches to digital interactions that new generations of learners possess?
- Does the notion of ‘learner-generated cultural resources’ represent a sustainable paradigm shift for formal education in which learning is viewed in categories of context and not content?
- What are the issues in terms of ‘text’ production in terms of modes of representation, (re)contextualisation and conceptions of ‘literacy’?
- Who decides/redefines what it means to have coherence in contemporary interaction?

References

- Adami, E. (2009a) ‘A self-reflexive semiotic analysis of mobile devices’, paper presented at the 3rd WLE Mobile Learning Symposium: Mobile Learning Cultures across Education, Work and Leisure, WLE Centre, IOE London, UK. March.
- Adami, E. (2009b) ‘Researching sign-making patterns of video-interaction on YouTube’, paper presented at the International Conference Beyond East and

- West: Two decades of media transformation after the fall of communisms. Central European University. Budapest. June.
- Adami, E. (2009c) 'Video-interaction on YouTube: Contemporary changes in semiosis and communication', unpublished PhD Thesis: University of Verona. April.
- Adami, E. (2009d) 'We/YouTube': Exploring sign-making in video-interaction', *Visual Communication* 8 (4).
- Adami, E. and Kress, G. (2009) 'A social semiotic account of (mobile) learning', paper presented at AERA (American Educational Research Association) 'Disciplined Inquiry: Education Research in the Circle of Knowledge', San Diego, California, USA. April.
- Bachmair, B., Pachler, N. and Cook, J. (2009) 'Mobile Phones as Cultural Resources of Learning, an Education Analysis of Structures, Mobile Expertise and Cultural Practices'. *Medienpädagogik online journal* (and from University of Aarhus press in Danish). See <http://www.medienpaed.com/2009/bachmair0903.pdf>
- Beaugrande, R. and Dressler, W. (1981) 'Introduction to Text Linguistics'. London: Longman.
- Cook, J. (2009a) 'Mobile Learner Generated Contexts: Research on the Internalization of the World of Cultural Products'. In B. Bachmair (Ed.) *Media Literacy in New Cultural Spaces (Medienbildung in Neuen Kulturräumen)*. Wiesbaden, Germany: VS-Verlag für Sozialwissenschaft, due end of 2009.
- Cook, J. (2009b) 'Going for a Local Walkabout: Putting Urban Planning Education in Context with Mobile Phones'. Invited talk at LearnHigher CETL 'M-Posium' on Mobile Learning. April 22nd, Manchester Metropolitan University. See <http://www.slideshare.net/johnnigelcook/urban-planning-education-in-context-with-mobile-phones>
- Cook, J. (2007a) 'Smells Like Teen Spirit: Generation CX'. Ideas in Cyberspace Education (ICE3), 21-23 March, Loch Lomond, Scotland.
- Cook, J. (2007b) 'Generating New Learning Contexts: Novel Forms of Reuse and Learning on the Move'. Invited talk at ED-MEDIA 2007 – World Conference on Educational Multimedia, Hypermedia & Telecommunications, June 25-29, Vancouver, Canada.
- Fairclough, N. (1992) 'Discourse and Social Change'. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Halliday, M. A. K. and Hasan, R. (1976) 'Cohesion in English'. Harlow: Longman.
- Kress, G and Adami, E. (2009) 'A social semiotic analysis of mobile devices: Interrelations of technology and social habitus', in Pachler, N., Bachmair, B., Cook, J. and Kress, G. *Mobile Learning Outside and Inside: Structure – Agency – Practices*. New York: Springer.
- LGC Wiki (2007) 'Wiki for Learner Generated Contexts Group'. <http://learnergeneratedcontexts.pbwiki.com/>, accessed April 4th 2007.
- Pachler, N., Bachmair, B., Cook, J. and Kress, G. (in press) 'Mobile Learning: Structure – Agency – Practices'. New York: Springer. Due Autumn 2009.
- Pachler, N. and Adami, E. (2009) 'A social semiotic analysis of Smartphones: Implications for formal education', paper presented at CAL '09 Learning in Digital Worlds, Brighton, UK. March.
- van Dijk, T. A. (ed) (1985) 'Handbook of Discourse Analysis'. London: Academic Press.
- Vygotsky, L. (1930 / 1978) 'Mind in society. The development of higher psychological processes'. Edited by Cole, Michael et al. Cambridge, MA. Harvard University Press.