

AGGREGATE-THEN-CURATE: HOW FORMAL, NON-FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING COMBINE

TO SUSTAIN THE QUALITY OF ONLINE CONTENT

This paper addresses the conference themes of social media; open education; transliteracy; and crowd sourcing. The 'edges of higher education' that it explores and works within are those which connect HE institutions to the processes of informal learning and online content development which exist within its local community/area.

It reports on results from a project, MOSI-ALONG, which ran in Manchester, UK, during 2011 and was funded by JISC (the Joint Information Systems Committee: the body in UK HE charged with resourcing the effective use of digital technologies in higher education). MOSI-ALONG was a partnership of several formal and non-formal educational institutions in the city including the University of Manchester; MOSI (the Museum of Science and Industry); Mimas, a national data centre; the Learning, Skills and Employment Network; and Peoples' Voice Media, who train clients in 'citizen journalism' skills.

MOSI-ALONG was based on a model for the creation of online content – Aggregate-then-Curate – that was developed from earlier work concerning digital inclusion in UK Online centres, models of informal e-learning (Garnett and Ecclesfield 2009) and the idea of an 'ecology of resources' (Luckin 2010). It addresses the various different ways in which the quality and relevance of information can be assured, through collaboration between formal and non-formal education institutions and the informal learning networks which exist outside these institutional spaces. Such resource collections are essential support structures for the learning processes which take place both inside and outside the HE institution and, thus, span the edges or boundaries of HE.

However, there is a fundamental tension between the way that these collections are created and structured on each side of this boundary. When investigating collaborations between formal educational institutions, such as universities, and the informal learning networks of society, we must be conscious of the different ways in which these resources are defined. 'Education' is a top-down process which tends to direct learners' attention by defining resources in specific ways and in specific patterns: those who 'succeed' (qualify, get high grades) in these formal programmes are those who have been able to structure and display their learning in ways which fit these patterns (Garnett and Ecclesfield 2009). 'Learning', on the other hand, is bottom-up, often spontaneous and harder to structure.

Simon (2010) and Barr (2005) both draw attention to the tensions which can arise between how museums define and structure their learning resources, and how users see and define them: the work of Luckin et al (2010) presents a similar argument vis-a-vis universities and schools. How can learners outside these institutions reach within them for support with their learning, and how can the institutions themselves revise and adapt their structuring of resources in light of the needs of these groups? Why should they do so, and do they even have an interest in doing so?

If such institutions do not meet the needs of particular groups they can easily be bypassed. This reduces their relevance to society at a time at which they must be conscious of questions such as funding and accountability. At the same time, the Aggregate-then-Curate model also, to some extent, accepts the criticism of writers such as Keen (2007), who criticises the way in which such bypassing can result in the deterioration of quality of online content – what Keen calls ‘The Cult of the Amateur’. But such deterioration does not have to be inevitable. Communities and institutions can both learn from each other and through doing so, enhance the quality of online resources. Aggregate-then-Curate shows how creating online content can be viewed as a 7-step process, initiated by individuals but bringing in ‘digital learning champions’, other community members and formal educational institutions at different stages. Aggregate-then-Curate can be used to design training to help build the capacity to manage community informational resources in an inclusive way. Through such training, communities and community members can sustain the quality of the online resources on which they depend, and at the same time, develop transliteracy skills, that is, the use of a range of media, including social media, to sustain the ‘digital habitat’ (Wenger, White and Smith 2009) within which they exist.

The session will discuss and evaluate MOSI-ALONG, showing how the Aggregate-then-Curate model can be used to design educational programmes that help build the capacity to manage community informational resources in an inclusive way. MOSI-ALONG worked to bring the institutions (mentioned above) together with local communities in Manchester, through social media, training sessions for ‘digital learning champions’ and the creation of ‘Cabinets of Curiosities’: historical resources relevant to the present-day learning needs of these communities. Though this work is currently located on the ‘edge’ of higher education we believe it must move into the mainstream if such institutions are to retain their relevance in the future, particularly where these institutions are not ‘global brands’ but must themselves draw on resources (students, businesses, communities) in their locality and region in order to stay sustainable.

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