

DRAFT

Lenses, Learning and Likes: Multi-modal Learning with and of the Digital.

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This paper serves as a case study of a project that creates multiple online learning spaces and pathways for teens to college-aged youth, through both formal and informal instruction and participation. We present three instantiations of the open and connected project, Phonar, in order to highlight the critical technological, methodological, and socio-cultural challenges that were transformative in informing the development, design, and execution of online learning spaces for youth. The Phonar projects systematically explore the nuanced ways connecting learning across environments and brokering learning for youth offline and online unfolds in real practice settings.

The projects are Phonar (an upper level undergraduate college Photography and Narrative class which ran as an open class from 2008-2014), Phonar Nation (an adaptation of Phonar aimed at a non-dominant teen demographic, which ran first in 2014) and Phonar-accelerator (an abridged version of the Phonar class for advanced high school students and general studies college students, presently in development).

The Projects

Phonar (short for Photography and Narrative)

The Phonar - Photography and Narrative - classes, were a 10-week in-person undergraduate module in the third year of a three-year degree course offered at Coventry University, in the United Kingdom. The purpose of the course was to prepare students for their final exit-module (an exhibition or degree show). This course challenged them to redefine and reinterpret the concept of “exhibition,” to consider professional career strategies or applications of their undergraduate skills after graduation, and offered an opportunity to explore what a 21st century photographer might be.

Approach

In order to achieve these goals, the course sought to leverage the power of interest-driven learning and the atomized, multi-environmental media habits of contemporary digital learners. The instructor deliberately intended to leverage and cultivate these factors as entry points rather than barriers to, or distractions from engagement.

The design of the class content was strategic and lessons opened by asking students capacious and complex priming questions, which framed and informed the subsequent interpretation of class content such as lectures and assignments. The instructor modeled learning behavior, by preparing recorded interviews with notable artists or community participants. The recorded interviews were important and integral to the course because they presented the instructor in the role of a co-questioner and co-learner, and in this way modeled and set the stage for the students to engage in the material in a critical way alongside their “instructor.”

The interviewees were also strategically selected to bring a perspective that would offer a disruptive alternative to that of a traditional photographer. The science fiction writer Cory Doctorow, for example, whose influence can be found throughout Phonar, brought new ways of understanding how the photographic artifact differed from the photographic image, when he talked about the business model for his own book publishing, licensing as he does with a Creative Commons License. This enables the reader to freely share his books as eBooks whilst at the same time, offering a variety of physical (paid-for) alternatives (hardback, softback, limited edition, signed, etc.). Cory Doctorow introduced the class to the voluntary payment models of Nine Inch Nails and later of Radiohead¹ and made us question whether (in a world full of media producers) our biggest threats were piracy (as the industry led us to believe) or were they obscurity? If the latter, then how might we reconsider our relationships with people previously thought of as customers or pirates of a (photographic) product, to position them as collaborators in a storytelling process?

Similarly the blogger Pete Brook² never made photographs and came from a museum studies background, it was his driving interest in U.S. prison reform and how photography is being used in that debate that gave shape to the genre of “prison photography.” And then, to another extreme, was the cellist Laura Ritchie, who played music that, had been written expressly to be visualized. In each of these cases, it wasn't the place of the photography instructor to teach new media economics, blogging, or music, but to contextualize these issues in relation to how they are redefining photographic practice and identity.

¹ Benkler, Y. (2011). *The penguin and the Leviathan: The triumph of cooperation over self-interest*. New York: Crown Business.

² Prison Photography | The Image / Incarceration / Representation / Media / Social Justice / Responsible Photography. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://prisonphotography.org/>

In addition, the assignment encouraged students to listen to the recorded interviews at their own pace. The definition of note taking was expanded to include the use of the digital platform Twitter, as a means to publicly sharing notes on the class with their peers and the extended photographic communities. It is important to note that while the in-person students at Coventry University attended the Phonar class, all the class material was made available to anyone willing to participate online. The Phonar website offered all the recorded lectures, provided instructions for assignments, readings, etc., and encouraged online participants to contribute alongside the in-person participants. Both in-person and online co-learners received the same content and were able to participate by sharing in ways that democratized participation and engagement with the course material. A curated summary of class notes (using Storify) would then feature both in-person and remote participants' contributions and be published post-class on the website. That class website also contained a blogroll of the participants' own sites and a feed of the #phonar hashtag, operating as what Jeff Jarvis describes "an aggregating hub"—by consolidating the class content, the community (via the blogroll) and the conversation (via Twitter feed). It enabled the class conversation to be distributed both geographically and temporally, unhitching it from the Wednesday morning, ground floor back of a converted cinema classroom, to a real-world iteration.

The way these technologies were employed was also expansive and inclusive. Students were directed to interpret the framing questions broadly and to draw in their own particular interests and expertise. It often meant that participants would go through this photography course not making a photograph, choosing instead to take on the role of photo editor, multimodal producer, fine artist or archivist, for example. They were also encouraged to draw their own communities of interest into their work and the class. In order to underscore the importance of their own networks and make the process more concrete and relevant, we created actual "network maps." Initially, we would analyze the Twitter conversations manually as part of class assignments, but later used more sophisticated instruments such as TAGS Explorer. Visualizing the networked communities and conversations enabled us to think of the connected class as an expanding and living networked resource pool. This approach had a cumulative effect as it also further enriched the class's networked community.

The development of the materials and of these approaches was organic and responsive. Rather than seeking to prove or disprove a particular thesis, the design perspective was intent on seeking to solve and address challenges emerging from the use of alternative pedagogies for learning with the digital. As such, the participants in the classes (both students and teachers inside and out of the classroom), each contributed to the development and design of what became a method born of an open

and connected approach: open (e.g. free to access, re-usable, etc.) and “connected” (linked to wider communities of interest beyond the class subject and classroom).

The Guiding Question

The design of the curriculum centered on answering an essential question that was reframed and refined in order to more holistically integrate the learning practices we were employing in the course. The question “*What is it to be a 21st century photographer when everyone with a smart device is a potential witness, photographer and publisher?*” was instrumental in facilitating the types of interest-driven and open-learning behaviors and interactions that we were seeking to cultivate in the community. For would-be photographers, this meant more than being just another supplier of images in a world full of image-makers and ubiquitous smart devices. It helped us to think not only of what the digital meant for photographers, but what it meant for us as learners and as citizens, too. This expansive interpretation led us to take a metacognitive view of our own learning processes and understand how digital ecologies changed the flow of information from one to many to a rhizomatic digital ecology. And, this was as true for the newspaper publisher in the 21st century as it was for the post-digital teacher. Our new and pressing question became: *when everyone is talking at the same time, how do you get your voice heard and how do you move people to action?*

For many in-class participants having only experienced a traditional education system, participating in Phonar and engaging in the open learning approach, also represented a departure from the largely algorithmic style of learning that had epitomized their experiences. Unlike high school and other classes in higher education, the “live” Phonar class did not end abruptly with an exam that could be agonized over, but it demanded a problem-solving (heuristic) approach, one that valued (marked higher) the process over the final product. It was intended as a rich resource in itself to be drawn on in future classes both in terms of its content, community, and conversation.

We looked to interview and draw into the class conversation people, who were thriving in this new digital landscape, people who actively engaged with their social networks from whom and by association with, we could borrow from their social capital and assume a degree of their credibility by proxy. When they tweeted about the class or commented on the student's own notes, it would amplify the impact of that note and of the class as a whole. This proved so successful that including the Twitter ID's of the people referenced in our notes became standard practice and a method for engaging new people into the class dialogue. Along with the use of hashtags, these methods afforded us the opportunity to amplify the impact of the class, and also to tune a clear signal of the class Twitter conversation over time, both of which spoke to being heard and hearing effectively through these new social media channels.

Phonar Nation

Background

The Phonar Nation class was a five-week free course for teens offered as an in-person summer course at the Los Angeles Public Library and online through the class website, Phonar.org, Pursuiter.com, and Cities of Learning platforms. The purpose of this course was for the Digital Media and Learning Research Hub (DML Hub) to study the ways non-dominant youth were accessing online enrichment opportunities.

The partnership between Phonar and the DML Research Hub, UC Irvine surfaced through Reclaim Open Learning, a collaboration between the DML Hub and the MIT Media Lab meant to re-think the “MOOC” and to explore the best of truly open, online and networked learning in the wilds of the Internet, with the expertise represented by institutions of higher education. The DML Hub and Jonathan Worth worked to translate and teach Phonar’s undergraduate level course to a mobile friendly course for American non-dominant urban teens. The design approach that guided the re-mix of the course considered a connected learning approach that “advocates for broadened access to learning that is socially embedded, interest-driven, and oriented toward educational, economic, or political opportunity³” (Ito et al, 2012).

In order to include teens in the redesign of the Phonar course for a youth audience, the DML Hub and Phonar forged a collaboration with The Cambodian Family, a community center in Santa Ana, California, providing a variety of services for low-income families, including after-school programming for teens. The 10 teens that collaborated in the co-creation of the course ranged in ages from 13 to 18 and had been receiving services from the Cambodian Family since elementary school, and were very familiar with the environment and the expectations at the center. Though the center had been initially created to assist Cambodian refugees, the clientele that they presently serve is primarily Hispanic and, accordingly, the teens participating in this after-school project were mostly first-generation Hispanic teens, with a smaller number of Cambodian youth.

In order to provide a baseline of equal access for all youth involved, the DML Hub supplied the teens with a choice of an iPad or an iPhone, as well as two wifi hot spots to the community center that would provide the bandwidth needed during the development of the course. Though the teens were excited at the prospect of receiving (and keeping)

³ Connected Learning: An Agenda for Research and Design. Mizuko Ito, Kris Gutierrez, Sonia Livingstone, Bill Penuel, Jean Rhodes, Katie Salen, Juliet Schor, Julian Sefton-Green, and S. Craig Watkins. Report Date: Dec 31, 2012. Retrieved from: <http://dmlhub.net/publications/connected-learning-agenda-for-research-and-design/>

their own devices, adult mentors' lack of digital literacy skills and understanding of interest-driven learning created challenges during the development of the course.

Digital Environments and Adult Mentors

At home and at school, youth had very little time to engage in activities with their devices that were interest driven, mainly because none of them had a “smart device” but also because adults both at home and at the center viewed digital media as a necessity (access to computers for homework), but also as a distraction or a luxury. For example, the staff members at the center were ambivalent about the value of the Internet and technology and viewed the development of the Phonar Nation and related class assignments as “fun” activities to be enjoyed after the “real” homework was completed. Unintentionally, the development of Phonar Nation served as a vehicle to continuously educate the adults of the value of interest-driven learning.

At the outset in our conversations with the teens, we framed the development of Phonar Nation class as a collaboration not as a course. The redefinition of the roles was not something the teens were able to embrace readily. They were so accustomed to taking orders and “doing what they were told” that many of the weekly meetings included discussions about personal empowerment and the different ways of using online spaces, and encouragement to enjoy the devices through games, apps and playful exploration. To encourage a more playful behavior and approach to technology, participants were given a \$20 gift card to purchase games, movies, apps, etc.

In order to find alternatives for the lack of broadband connection at home, teens used resources available to them, such as trips to Starbucks to take advantage of free wifi to post Phonar Nation images or communicate with each other via the What’sApp group channel we created for the class. We empowered them to ask for the wifi spots at the center, since we were only with them one hour, one day a week, so that they could complete homework assignments during their after school tutoring period, but also to continue tinkering with their devices.

Co-creating and Translating

We worked with the teens for twelve months on the development of website and the content for Phonar Nation. The adaptation of Phonar, the undergraduate university course, to Phonar Nation, the teen course for mobile, was drastic given the developmental needs of teens and the design considerations for after-school programming. The courses were set up so that an instructor from the UK taught the class remotely via Google hangout. At the beginning, it was difficult for the remote co-facilitator to get the sense of what was occurring in the room, for example, if it seemed like teens were overtired, hungry, or bored. The in-person DML Hub facilitators and the

Phonar staff debriefed after every class and used the feedback as formative data to design, and shape the content, pacing, and structure of the lessons.

Lessons were structured to be hands-on an interactive from the outset so that teens had enough time to “mess around” with their devices, post their work online, and also have the opportunity to reflect on their experience. We worked concurrently with youth both on the design of the lessons and the development of a website that would feature the lessons in a way that were easily accessible and responsive on mobile devices.

The teens at The Cambodian Family center reminded us often and in their own way, to keep the material learner centered, project based, and culturally relevant.

What We Build

Phonar Nation primarily teaches storytelling and narrative techniques, and integrates basic visual/photographic concepts such as studies of light and scale. The course is not about learning how to be a photographer, but rather, how to be an effective 21st century storyteller. The Phonar Nation class consists of 5 sessions. Each session opens with a hands-on *Task*; *LevelAwesome* includes a challenge to make the task more complicated; a *Tools* section that is intended to encourage the user to explore different resources when engaging in the hands on task; and *Going Deep*, provides three extensions to the session. Phonar Nation offered badges through the Pursuiter.com platform and the Cities of Learning platforms during the summer of 2014.

The mobile site includes social media (Flickr/Instagram) aggregators that pull images into a photo stream through the use of hashtags. At the beginning we also used Twitter, but found that adults dominated the conversation so only image based sharing platforms were included in the aggregator.

Summer of Learning

From the perspective of the DML Hub, the partnership between Phonar and the Los Angeles Public Libraries was an effort to continue studying the ways non-dominant youth were on-boarding online learning and affinity spaces. Teen librarians at the Junipero Serra and Echo Park Branches offered drop-in summer courses for teens - Phonar and Scratch during the summer of 2014.

The librarians participated in a workshop with Jonathan Worth who helped them understand their roles as facilitators. The DML Hub boosted each sites bandwidth by providing them hot spots in order that participants could upload and share their class assignments with greater ease while at the branches.

The libraries had approximately 34 teens participating in the Phonar Nation summer course. We found that the librarians knowledge of technology affected the delivery of content given that the content was only available through on-line platforms. That said, librarians were key to connecting youth to online opportunities irrespective of their ease with technology. Librarians also had concerns over privacy of the users particularly around the creation of personal social media accounts and the management of devices. The libraries made devices available for checkout so that the participants could use them during the time they were participating in the program. Since the creation of personal accounts could create security issues, the decision was made to create general library accounts, for example on Flickr or Instagram so that teens could share their work online. In addition, as evidenced in the formative stage of Phonar Nation at the Cambodian Family Center, the teen's lack of access to broadband at home and the often-unstable online environment at the library was not greatly conducive to onboarding non-dominant teens to mobile ready online course.

Phonar Accelerator

Background

During a time when the Phonar Nation community of teachers and instructors was organically growing in the United States and Europe, there was a need to provide instruction for high school and undergraduate students in a more accessible and developmentally appropriate way. For example, Andrea Mellen Birnbaum, a high school teacher in Michigan used Phonar Nation successfully with a middle school demographic, with positive feedback and results but struggled when applying the same content to an older [college] cohort. What she needed was a class as accessible as Phonar Nation in its approach and delivery, but with content that would engage an audience of high school seniors and college undergraduates. Phonar Accelerator was created by repurposing content from the Phonar undergraduate course but utilizing the mobile friendly environment offered through the Phonar Nation interface.

Phonar Nation Evolves

After "the Summer of Learning" in 2014, there was a continued interest from individual teachers seeking to integrate Phonar Nation into both formal and informal teaching practices. As these inquiries became more frequent, an appropriate and somewhat natural means for us to communicate with them was as a group, this informal gathering ended up developing into a community of teachers and instructors co-learning how to appropriate and remix Phonar Nation for their respective cohorts. Phonar Nation's curriculum lends itself to this "remixing". For instance, a teacher in Chicago re-appropriated the first task 'Working with Light' so that it would complement a lesson in physics, understanding light and shadows. Another instructor in Lincolnshire opted not

to follow the chronological order as suggested on the website, but to pick and mix the tasks as directed by the learners. Phonar and Phonar Nation, as a model, openly invite others to remix the class under the Attribution Creative Commons license⁴ and the common hashtag, which “lets others distribute, remix, tweak, and build upon your work, even commercially, as long as they credit you for the original creation.”

What We Build

In response to Andrea’s struggle to engage her college students, the Phonar Accelerator is being developed. The framework of the class is being created by re-packaging content of the Phonar undergraduate course with the mobile friendly course delivery of Phonar Nation. Since, the curriculum approach is similar to the one used in Phonar Nation, the lessons address core principles of storytelling⁵ aiming to begin to engage co-learning in inquiry into: *What is a story? Who is the Narrator?, Who is the audience?, and What is the outcome?*. These guiding questions form the basis for lesson that includes a lecture and activity from the Phonar class.

Phonar Accelerator participants who wish to also participate in the ten-week undergraduate course may do so. In essence, this more condensed version of Phonar offers another alternative to scaffolding into a broader community of co-learners by enabling students to both participate in the class and engage with the wider community. This has meant that the Phonar Accelerator has had to also provide instructors with a technical understanding of how to facilitate these learning environments and experiences. The toolkit provides instructions of how to use Twitter and Storify as a means to listen to the contributors and curate class notes⁶.

Conclusion

The Phonar and Phonar Nation classes look through a particular lens on a moment within a rapidly evolving digital landscape. That lens is photographic but the questions addressed are much broader and inclusive. The paradigm shifts that the medium and industry of photography are going through are analogous to the challenges faced by the 21st century teacher and teaching institution. Both photographer and teacher face abundant supplies of their once scarce products and the rhizomatic nature of the web challenges the nature of both *one-to-many authoritative broadcast* business models.

⁴ Creative Commons License 4 26, 2016 Retrived from: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/>

⁵ Phonar Nation demands participants, through activity-led learning, to understand ‘who is your audience?’, ‘what do you want to say to them?’ and ‘what do you want them to do?’.

⁶ The technical instructions that were developed for new instructors adopting the Phonar Accelerator were used as benchmark instructions for Connecting Classe, an open framework and community of teachers and instructors to apply open and connected methodologies into their practices.

The last official undergraduate Phonar class ended in 2014 but the public conversation that it continues to live within (via the #Phonar hashtag) describes a world of abundant photo-suppliers, where digital technologies have removed the barriers to entry into a practice that protected it for 150 years, where more and evolving visual media are being produced and shared at an ever increasing rate and the lack of interpretative skills of the picture-reader are becoming barriers to both understanding and action. Traditional front page storytellers aren't able to be heard over the abundance of visual noise⁷. New digital literacies are emerging where the photograph's evidential currency is replaced by experiential uses for the image⁸ and an invisible economy of contextual metadata is thriving.

The Phonar model explores in depth how learning in a disrupted media economy, and developing new business models is essential to developing sustainable practices and livelihoods. The model does this by reflecting holistically on structures of information. It encourages participants to take meta-cognitive views of the locations they inhabit affording new perspectives and positions. With an abundance of images the photographer's value was not in making more pictures, but to help other people make better ones. With an abundance of information the teacher's real value is not in competing with the library of the web but in helping navigate and discern amongst it.

Phonar and the various projects that come from that model, not only represent an experiment in open learning practice, but also a case study for the ways in which pathways for youth might be made available both formally and informally. The Phonar Nation project demonstrates the many challenges that non-dominant youth in the United States face when on-boarding to digital spaces and offers a glimpse of the possibilities that rich paths of learning connections might afford to those who need them the most.

⁷ What Matters Now? Proposals For A New Front Page Aperture NY | A Photo Student. (2011, August 26). Retrieved May 3, 2016, from <http://www.aphotostudent.com/james-pomerantz/2011/08/26/what-matters-now-proposals-for-a-new-front-page-aperture-ny/>

⁸ Peck, R. (2016, April 29). Snapchat User `Stories' Fuel 10 Billion Daily Video Views - Bloomberg. Retrieved May 3, 2016, from <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-04-28/snapchat-user-content-fuels-jump-to-10-billion-daily-video-views>