SPIDER project summary handout — CHERIL conference 30th January 2018

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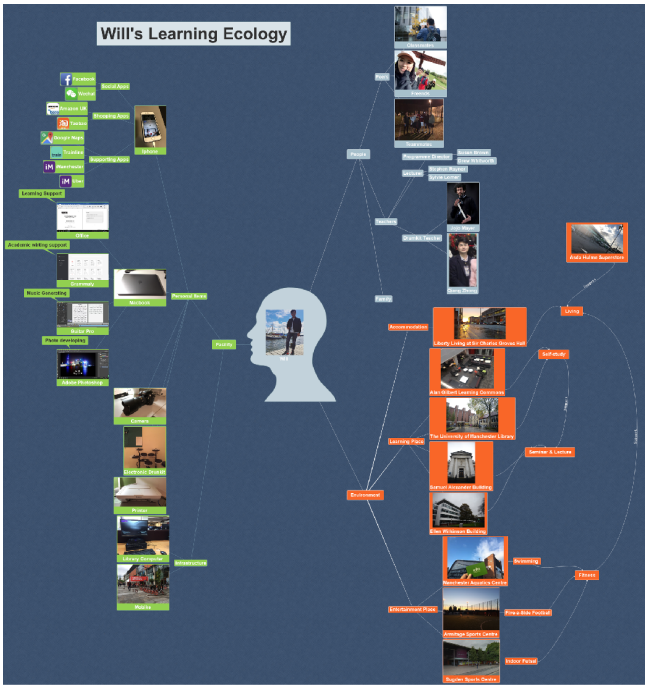
CONTEXT

The focus here is on ***employability*** and other characteristics of the Manchester graduate — not just developed to secure paid employment but also to be active citizens, socially responsible, etc. Ultimately: how do we develop more in our graduates than just disciplinary knowledge?

Digital and information literacies: being able to make reasoned judgments about sources of information, choice of media used to both consume and produce the 'information landscape'. Wenger, White and Smith (2009) refer to this as *stewarding the digital habitat.*



The figure on the right is a 'map' of the technological and informational resources drawn on by a particular student (they were asked to draw maps like these as one activity on the course unit to be described below). Although the details here will be too small to make out it is apparent that the student recognises they draw on a wide range of different technologies and sources of information, some for their studies, and some for everyday life. Sometimes these coincide, but other times, they are different domains.

Making our way through the world, whether by employment, active citizenship, or personal development — these processes now require us all to have abilities with a wide range of digital tools, and to be able to use them to organise work, acquire information, communicate with colleagues and so on.

Therefore, we set out to ask: How are students in HE developing the *practices* they will need to engage in after graduation?

PROJECT

SPIDER (Stewarding and Power In Digital Educational Resources) Drawn from a set of 20 online discussion boards, in which groups of students (PGT, Manchester Institute of Education) worked on a series of collaborative tasks.

Before the tasks begin there is a 'starter habitat', essentially the same for all the groups. This habitat is *filtered* in ways that reflect the *authority* of the course tutor and also, at one level up, the university and its procedures. In other words, the requirement that the course unit have a Blackboard presence, include an assessment submitted via TII, etc. The course tutor then sets up parameters that shape the starter habitat including the reading list, the curriculum, and the specifications for the activities.

The 'starter habitat'…

Those elements of the course environment which are available to the students prior to any activity taking place within, including:

- curriculum and syllabus (what is taught and the organisation of the material)
- reading lists, other information sources suggested by the teacher
- Blackboard and its tools (discussion boards, Turnitin)
- assignment specifications
- the tutor's own knowledge of the subject, and his/her expression of that knowledge
- other communication tools in use, like e-mail

But once the activities are under way, and students work together in groups (5-7 students), each habitat evolves in different ways as ***practices are negotiated*** by the groups. These negotiations take place within the parameters encouraged by the structure and content of the 'starter habitat', but while these influence the direction the practices take, they do not determine it.

EXAMPLES
We are currently writing up the study (January 2018). Hopefully, publications will come out of this by the end of this year or early 2019. Quotes that illuminate these examples can also be found on the presentation at https://www.slideshare.net/DrewWhitworth1/sarah-fielden-lecture111017

1) Bringing in information sources and different media
This seems straightforward but nevertheless it is an essential aspect of the students learning to not rely 100% on the 'starter habitat' and helping each other explore information sources that can be added to the environment and drawn on as the basis of practice.

For example: (see slides 20-21 of the presentation): students have to provide information to other members of the group regarding a field trip they conducted to a museum: they do this in turn by:
* directing colleagues to a web site
* presenting their own narrative via a verbal description of their experience
* sharing images and photos they captured during their visit.

These suggestions may or may not be *validated* by other members of the group (e.g. "I have checked the web site and it sounds interesting….").

2) Stewarding the habitat, bringing in new technologies
See slides 22-27 of the presentation. Blackboard discussion boards are not necessarily the students' favoured communication tools. They explore other solutions of their own volition — often different ones depending on the group:

> *"Being very pro-wiki I have created 4 wikis now to help us with this project…"*

A colleague validates this practice, but also admits that she needs help getting this tool to work for her — invoking the *educational* aspect of stewarding:

> *"Not only do you like a good wiki....we all like a good wiki now. Anyway they look good. However can I ask how you do the colour for the text, I tried last time and never succeeded… Looking forward to hearing how to do this (I am sure it is really easy and I am just being stupid)."*

The first student in turn obliges with some informal technology coaching:

> *"No worries C :) There is a button that has a 'T' on it with a small triangle indicating a drop down menu on the top row of tools. If you click on that triangle the colour menu will appear and the text colour can then be changed. "*

3) Claiming authority, organising the discussion
Finally, students have brought into these starter habitats a number of other pre-existing information landscapes (reflected by the diagram on the first page). These landscapes reflect varying amounts of prior professional practice and give (or do not give) them a certain *authority* within the group when it comes to making judgments about technology, sources and how to organise their practice in order that the group can achieve its aims.

Many issues arise here (too many for this brief handout) but in summary, manifestations of power and authority are bound up in a complex way with how students *perceive* the authority of the tutor, who is often invoked *despite not directly contributing to boards* in the final activity:

> *We discussed this briefly in the online session with Drew saying that in museums dealing with historical artifacts, it's not always possible to see the artifacts as they simply do not exist.*
>
> *By the way, don't you think that we may have taken this discussion a little bit too far? Should we go back a little before we go more on to technical details. I refer back to Drew's questions for the discussion, maybe we can use that as a guidance?*