Academic Commons

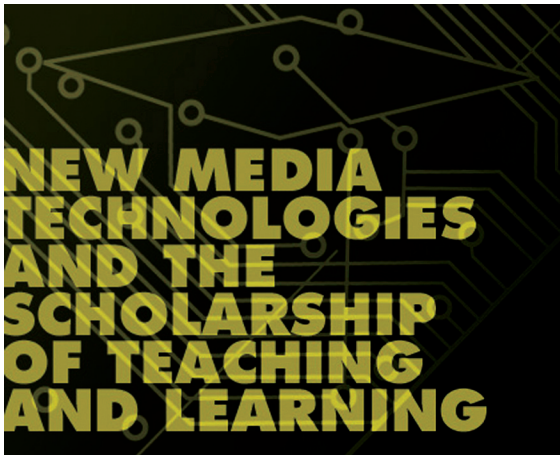## "New Media Technologies and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning"

January 2009 issue of Filtered: The Academic Commons Magazine

Edited by Randy Bass with Bret Eynon and an editorial group from Georgetown University's Center for New Designs in Learning & Scholarship (Eddie Maloney, Susannah McGowan, John Rakestraw and Theresa Schlafly)

CN⌁LS

Center for New Designs in Learning and Scholarship

Reprinted from the January 2009 issue of Academic Commons on "New Media Technologies and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning," edited by Randy Bass with Bret Eynon and an editorial group from the Center for New Designs in Learning and Scholarship (CNDLS) at Georgetown University-- Eddie Maloney, Susannah McGowan, John Rakestraw and Theresa Schlafly
http://www.academiccommons.org/issue/january-2009

Center for New Designs in Learning and Scholarship (CNDLS)

3520 Prospect St. NW, # 314
Washington, DC 20057
http://cndls.georgetown.edu

Table of Contents

New Media Technologies and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning:

Participatory Learning and the New Humanities:

An Interview with Cathy Davidson

Cathy Davidson is Ruth F. DeVarney Professor of English and John Hope Franklin Humanities Institute Professor of Interdisciplinary Studies at Duke University. Davidson is co-founder of HASTAC (pronounced "haystack": Humanities, Arts, Science, Technology Advanced Collaboratory) and co-director of the Digital Media and Learning Competition, funded by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. Davidson talks here with Randy Bass. Interview and related materials edited by Randy Bass and Theresa Schlafly.

Bass: In the MacArthur Foundation Digital Media and Learning Competition, which featured it as a theme, "Participatory Learning" is defined this way:

> *Participatory Learning includes the ways in which new technologies enable learners (of any age) to contribute in diverse ways to individual and shared learning goals. Through games, wikis, blogs, virtual environments, social network sites, cell phones, mobile devices, and other digital platforms, learners can participate in virtual communities where they share ideas, comment upon one another's projects, and plan, design, advance, implement, or simply discuss their goals and ideas together. Participatory learners come together to aggregate their ideas and experiences in a way that makes the whole ultimately greater than the sum of the parts.[1]*

Why did "participatory learning" become important as an organizing theme for the DML Competition?

Davidson: Last year this competition was more wide open--one category was just innovation, another was knowledge networking. As we looked back after the competition was over we found among the winning proposals a cluster of exciting projects that were all looking at this newly enhanced, digitally enhanced, form of learning. We thought it would be interesting to do a more specialized competition on participatory learning this year and see what we came up with. We were especially interested in a form of interactive learning where the whole is much greater than the sum of the parts.

This builds on a method that HASTAC has been dubbing since 2002, when we first began, "collaboration by difference." If you read much of the management literature, it's almost always fundamentally about collaboration where you have shared goals, and shared methods or shared areas of expertise. We became interested in this much looser way of learning, kind of mash-up learning, where people may or may not share credentials--some people might be credentialed, some people might not, and where people might have radically different training--a humanist and an artist and a cancer specialist might be talking about things together but the artist might be a cancer survivor who's in fact educated her- or himself more than many doctors on the diverse ways that cancer might be cured. What happens if you put all of those people in conversation? What new insights emerge from interactions where the protocols for success are not scripted in advance?

---

1 HASTAC Initiative, "Digital Media and Learning Competition," http://www.dmlcompetition.net/theme.php

We were also very interested in a third area of participatory learning: the global dimension. We're piloting an international competition this year. In globally interactive learning, participants may not even share ideas about the basic epistemology of learning. What we're interested in is how people can use existing digital tools--the social utility sites, social networking sites, something that looks like what some people are calling Web 2.0--to aggregate a range of responses from people who might not have anything else in common except that they're all participating on the same site. Someone might wander in and wander off and not even be part of any pre-existing community, yet might have something interesting to share.

We're very interested in the outcomes that happen when you don't know the outcomes that might happen. We went back and forth over the definition of participatory learning many times. For example, we put "problem-solving" in, and then we took it out, put it in, took it out. We decided not to include it because we didn't want to limit learning to the utilitarian. We wanted learning to be as visionary, creative, theoretical, or abstract as anybody's imagination. Problem-solving is one thing you can do through this accretive way of learning, but we were afraid that if we put problem-solving in there, ninety percent of applications would be about problem-solving, rather than thinking in the broadest, most interesting ways about what you can do when you're in a community with people that you may know but that you may not know. What happens if you leave your community open and invite the whole world in? In other words, when a community gets together and is talking about things, it not only defines the original problem or goal, but the goal itself might change dramatically over the course of the project. We wanted to allow for the free flow of thinking that may or may not end up solving "a problem."

That does feel very much like the way knowledge work, or even creative work, often gets done in the world. There is a kind of fluidity to it.

The fluidity needs to happen from beginning to end. You cannot separate creative design of new technologies from critical thinking about the use, the application, the cost, the environmental impact, and the intellectual property issues, as well as all of the issues of race, class, gender, sexuality, nationalism, religion, and region so important to humanistic study today. All of those issues have to be thought through at the same time that you're thinking about designing technology. That's why the Digital Media and Learning Initiative is such an interdisciplinary project. Often the people who are most skilled at making technology are not the most skilled at thinking critically about it. The people who are most skilled at thinking critically about these issues might not be the most skilled at the aesthetics and the kinesthetics of design. And so we all need to be working together. This is that model of "collaboration by difference." We might not have anything in common except what we know to be the case about our one contribution to something. But collaboratively and collectively we can yield something more interesting at the end. But all those things have to be thought through together. What we found last year with the winners of the first competition is often they worked in teams. It might be a musician who also was proficient in computer science working with a computer scientist who loved music. The *Princeton Laptop Orchestra* is what I'm thinking of here.[2] People are working

---

2 http://plork.cs.princeton.edu/

across divides which seem very distant but when they actually start working out problems together it turns out they might not be so distant after all. Again the whole can be larger than the sum of the parts.

Yet, all of this feels very different from the way we educate people--let alone how research and scholarship has traditionally unfolded in the humanities.

I know. To me it's one of the tragedies of the so-called information age. Here we have this astonishing new way that people are making knowledge together. As educators we should all be vibrating with happiness at this moment! Here are millions of people, typically unpaid, with no ulterior motive, for profit or otherwise, who are validating what we do as a profession with what they do in the spare time as a passion. That seems to suggest that all of us overworked underpaid teachers have it right, that in fact there is something about humanity that likes to learn, and likes to share its learning, and likes to participate. That's incredible! Every time I read some professor grousing about *Wikipedia*--that it's not reliable, it's not credentialed, etc.--I say sure, of course, so what reference work is perfect? What we may give up in some instances in expertise we more than make up for in scope. We have to have some skepticism about the products of participatory learning--skepticism is what we do as a profession. But, my God, you're talking about billions of contributions that people are making for free to world knowledge in so many languages, from so many different traditions of knowledge-making, and on a scale that the world has never seen before. I guess part of me just doesn't understand why this isn't the most exciting time for all of us in our profession. Why aren't we figuring out ways that we can use this exciting intellectual moment to bolster our mission in the world, our methods in the world, our reach in the world, our understanding of what we do and what we have to offer our students in the world? It just feels like we're in an age where we educators should be the thought leaders and instead we're futzing around the edges. Our profession's lack of excitement and leadership in all the issues surrounding the information age baffles me.

Is that an objective of HASTAC, to get beyond "futzing around the edges"?

Yes. Exactly. The Mellon Foundation did a wonderful thing--they invited the directors of all these humanities institutes to New York back in 2002. Harriet Zuckerman, Senior Vice President of the Mellon Foundation, invited me to talk to the directors of all these other institutes about what we were doing. This is when I was the co-director and co-founder of the John Hope Franklin Humanities Institute at Duke along with our dean, the literary scholar Karla F. C. Holloway. The Franklin Humanities Institute was at the epicenter of the much larger intellectual crossroads called the Franklin Center for Interdisciplinary and International Studies. It wasn't an isolated, hermit-like space but was in the center of the newest, most active intellectual space on campus. We were the new kids on the block, and we had this new idea that knowledge was important enough to be shared, not just among humanists but with all academics and with the general public. We were designing technologies to make our knowledge as public as possible. And we were holding weekly public forums, with a free lunch and free parking (crucial technologies!), to make even the most specialized knowledge available, accessible, and urgent.

This was 2002 and a lot of folks there had the attitude: "We're humanists now, we have to fight technology." But a couple of us felt the opposite. We were trying to say, "Wait, it's the information age! This is our era! This is what we've been waiting for! The humanities finally are central. We should be the voice of the information age! We have historical knowledge, we have critical tools, we know what information is, we have whole fields dedicated to understanding what knowledge and information are in this age, why isn't this our moment?" It was a great meeting. After we left, many of us resolved that the heads of as many humanities institutes as possible should come together to start a new organization that would be not digital humanities in the sense of archiving and tools, but as a new way of thinking about the human issues that are touched by absolutely every aspect of technology. If we were going to design tools, they should be tools that would help in the larger sense to promote thinking, and sharing of ideas, and learning together.

So that's the HASTAC origin story. We didn't have the term participatory learning back then, of course--that's a relatively new term. But social learning, creatively designing tools, and thinking critically about the role of technology in human life and in all aspects of society, were what we were pushing from the very beginning

.

This shift, it seems, is not just about "digital humanities," but humanities in general. In a piece you published in PMLA this year you called it "Humanities 2.0," where you said,

> *Humanities 2.0 is distinguished from monumental, first-generation, data-based projects not just by its interactivity but also by an openness about participation grounded in a different set of theoretical premises, which decenter knowledge and authority. Additional concepts decentered by Web 2.0 epistemologies include authorship, publication, refereeing, collaboration, participation, customizing, interdisciplinarity, credentialing, expertise, norms, training, mastery, hierarchy, taxonomy, professionalism, rigor, excellence, standards, and status.[3]*

Where in particular do you see resistance in the humanities around the idea of participatory learning?

I think it butts up against a number of issues. One is hierarchy and credentialing. If we're going to be thinking about participatory or social learning, what does that do to the idea of expertise? I personally don't think it really undermines it it, but many of the formal ways that we evaluate good work--mainly peer review--will undergo a significant transformation, at least expansion. As I said in the piece in PMLA,

> *The very concept of peer review needs to be defined and interrogated. We use the term as if it were self-explanatory and unitary, and yet who does and does not count as a peer is complex and part of a subtle and often self-constituting (and circular) system*

---

3 Cathy N. Davidson, "Humanities 2.0: Promise, Perils, Predictions," *PMLA* 123, no. 3 (May 2008): 711-712, http://www.mlajournals.org/doi/pdf/10.1632/pmla.2008.123.3.707

of accrediting and credentialing (i.e., "good schools" decide what constitutes a "good school"). We peer-review in different modes in different circumstances. (I've known some kind teachers to be savage conference respondents--and vice versa.) Humanities 2.0 peer review extends and makes public the various ways in which we act as professionals judging one another and contributing to one another's work, whether subtly or substantively.4

David Theo Goldberg and I wrote a draft of a book called The Future of Learning Institutions in a Digital Age that's been up for the last year on the Institution for the Future of the Book collaborative website, so that any human in the world is allowed to give us feedback and make comments on our book and on our ideas.[5] As I wrote in the PMLA piece, it's a little scary to have "track changes" available to the world, to anybody who has an internet connection and wants to register. Most of us don't put our work up to that kind of scrutiny when it's in draft form. That's pretty terrifying. So I have some empathy for people who have these resistances to Humanities 2.0.

Despite the terrifying nature of laying out your work, you say in the PMLA piece that it has been worth it. Again, to quote your PMLA piece:

Is this new process worth the trouble? Immeasurably. The project has exposed us to bibliographies from many different fields, to the specific uses of terminologies (and their histories) within fields. It has been one of the most fluidly interdisciplinary exchanges that I have yet experienced. It has also taught me how one's words can signal meanings one didn't intend. Reader response is humbling; it is also illuminating. So much of what passes in our profession for response is actually restatement of one's original premises. In an interactive collaborative exchange, one often gains a better sense of assumptions unfolding, a process that helps make one's unstated premises visible (especially to oneself).6

That seems like the "peer review" version of what you called earlier "collaboration by difference." Do you see this becoming common practice?

I don't think it is yet clear how much radical reorganization people in the humanities and social sciences want to do. If you carry through the conclusions of social and participatory learning, you come to deep issues that our fields may not wish to interrogate; we pass on these assumptions, often unspoken ones, from generation to generation. I'm teaching a class next semester called "The Early American Novel and Other Fictions." Talking about this course, I commented recently on a blog that every term in that title has to be interrogated, because that is what English studies are based on. Early--periodization. American--nation. Novel--genre. So, periodization, genre, and nation are the pillars

---

4 Davidson, 711.

5 http://www.futureofthebook.org/

6 Davidson, 712-713.

of how we post job offers, how we recruit people to English departments, how we define our field, how we define specializations.[7]

Can you say more about how participatory learning potentially destabilizes disciplinary categories? Is it because it reorganizes expertise?

Let's stay with the example of English departments and their reliance on periodization, genre, and nationalism. Personally, I'm not sure that any of those categories is relevant anymore, to the intellectual world we live in today or to the ways most of us do research. We are always reaching back, no matter what our field, to other sources, earlier examples, and we are constantly casting about in contemporary theory for constructs that help us to see our field more clearly. Ideas rarely have genres and rarely have national borders. Most of us know that. Yet to redefine what is important in a productive way to the field itself requires enormous upheaval. It isn't easy to redefine your field and interrogate its most basic structuring principles. It requires a lot of work and results in a lot of acrimony and often the result is backlash that lands you back where you started, but with irreparably bruised, battered, and bitter colleagues. That's one reason people create new interdisciplinary fields or even virtual organizations such as HASTAC. It is far easier to start new interdisciplinary movements from scratch with like-minded individuals than to try to change existing disciplines from inside. I always believe that if the new field succeeds, if it generates intellectual excitement, then it will feed back into and change the traditional discipline in a far more productive way, in the end, than engaging in departmentally-based attempts at disciplinary reform. And if the excitement is elsewhere, and departments dig in their heels and refuse to respond to it, their enrollments inevitably shrink, and they shrink into irrelevance. So be it. Those are choices that disciplines make.

What if we turn from the humanities as a profession to the "classroom." Should we be teaching students how to be effective participatory learners? How do we cultivate critical participatory learners or participatory knowledge creators?

I think that students are fabulous at participatory learning outside the classroom. When they are in the classroom, at any institution of higher learning, they have succeeded their entire life by excelling in a hierarchical model of learning of the kind that Ichabod Crane would be quite familiar with. To switch to the flickr "this photo sucks" kind of learning in an educational setting where--at least metaphorically--you're used to sitting in rows, looking straight ahead to the teacher, handing in your work on time, getting your A from the teacher, doing what's necessary to get that A, passing your PSATs, passing your SATs with flying colors, taking after-school cram school in order to do better on your SATs: after a lifetime of such preparation, it's really hard to switch modes. I mean, we've been training kids from infancy.

We know that even two-year-olds recognize when they are in "teaching situations." Infant developmental studies show that when you address toddlers in teaching mode, they sit straighter, their

---

7 Cathy Davidson, "This is Your Brain on the Internet," (blog entry, Sept. 8, 2008), http://www.hastac.org/node/1629 and "Youth in the Humanities Fourth Great Internet Age," (blog entry, Sept. 19, 2008), http://www.hastac.org/node/1662 .

pupils dilate, they turn their heads less. By the time they are 18, they think education is this posture of attention to superiors who have knowledge to impart to them--the whole hierarchy. Kids who are coming into college now were born around 1991, 1990. So we've had a whole generation not just trained in Web 2.0, but also in the fact that once you enter the schoolroom, Web 2.0 is over. It's not easy to teach them how to integrate the participatory learning from their social interactions and online extracurricular life into an educational setting that, structurally, remains entirely Ichabodian. You can't exactly say "Participate freely or I'll smack you with this (institutional) yardstick!" Right now, for most students, the Internet's openness is like a dirty secret you're not allowed to talk about in front of your teachers. The whole system of credentialing, grading, evaluating, writing recommendations, all of that, is antithetical to true participatory learning formats and learning communities. Higher education has never figured out if its primary goal is learning or if its primary goal is training citizens for elite positions of class power and leadership. The whole system of ranking (among institutions and among students) is based on "distinctions," as Bourdieu would say. Participatory learning, especially when it is anonymous, contests the bases and even the sanctity of many of those distinctions.

Do you think it would be possible, either within the HASTAC network or outside of it, to have some kind of thriving community among higher education faculty that would actually help us understand what we are learning, help people make sense of where participatory pedagogies are going?

Yes, I think a lot of it is happening already, even if it is around the edges. As I've said, change happens from the edge and then moves back into the center so this is as it should be, although I wish it were happening far faster. A lot of new networks are being formed, such as Classroom 2.0 which is mostly for high school teachers.[8] Or, for example, Savage Minds is this great collaborative blog in anthropology that a number of young scholars have started which is getting enough attention that some people within the cultural anthropology establishment have even worried about it, asking, Hey, how come you are making pronouncements? What entitles you? Who gave you permission? What gives you the right to comment on anthropology?[9] Every field needs the equivalent of Savage Minds. And that is happening, more and more.

Within HASTAC, we have an exciting new program which gives intellectual leadership not just to junior faculty but to graduate and even some undergraduate students and some practitioners in the field. We asked board members to support with a very modest fellowship ($300 per student) up to six students per institution whom they would nominate as HASTAC Scholars.[10] The selection was rigorous and so the director of the program, Erin Gentry Lamb (who is herself a doctoral student at Duke), wrote each HASTAC Scholar an impressive letter signaling for them, their chairs, and their deans, and for future employers that they have been chosen to be the intellectual leaders of a new field. We now have fifty-six HASTAC scholars representing twenty-one institutions. They can blog any time they want about what's happening at their institutions, what's happening around

---

8 http://www.classroom20.com/

9 http://savageminds.org/

10 http://www.hastac.org/scholars

the world, what's happening in their intellectual lives. Every two or three weeks a HASTAC Scholar also hosts an online forum, typically using SEESMIC (a vlog-to-vlog format) as well as blogs with discussion boards. We've had HASTAC Scholars forums on teaching in Second Life and other meta-verses, on fair use, on academic electronic publishing, and on the role of history in the study of new media. A HASTAC Scholar also co-hosted a forum with Howard Rheingold (Smart Mobs) and over 6000 people tuned in and many participated in that forum on participatory learning. The HASTAC Scholars themselves model the excitement with their own work across many different fields.

What were the key themes of that Forum? Where did he locate learning issues in relation to participatory learning?

In that Forum, Rheingold talked about how we should think about social media environments as where today's students live, and how he has observed that "student-led collaborative inquiry, and some student involvement in the selection and application of the texts to that inquiry, enlists their enthusiasm in ways that even very good lectures and excellent texts and otherwise excellent class discussions don't." In that session, he emphasized the importance of helping students to develop "meta-skills" of critical inquiry around these media. For example, he thinks some of his most effective teaching happens when he doesn't lay out the connections in the material too clearly, leaving the students to develop what he calls "the meta-skill of path-finding." Or, and this goes back to our discussion on peer review, he talks about how the responsibility for questioning the authority of the text belongs not to the publisher but to the readers. He also describes the "meta-skill of developing an individual voice in a collaborative environment."[11]

That sounds like the application of participatory learning to the project of educational transformation itself!

Yes, that's the point. With these HASTAC Scholar forums, we have the most exciting group of undergraduates and graduate students putting their interests out there, and showing their professors and advisors how much interest there is in these new intellectual areas. What we're doing is saying, Let's jump ahead by going directly to the students to see what their interests are and let's support those interests in every way we can. Let's see if we can't push education in a Web 2.0 way through a network we're creating from the students on up instead of from the top down. But we certainly give them a safety net in the fact that they are nominated by scholars who are among the most respected in the country. We don't want young scholars to have to fight this fight; we want to be able to support their future by exemplifying what they contribute rather than "plea bargaining" for it. In other words, instead of trying to preach to people who aren't converted yet, we're trying to build strength and networks and solidarity and credentialing and refereeing and respectability for the people who are there, on the assumption that if something's really exciting, people gravitate to it. We are positive that being an active and visible presence in the HASTAC Scholars program will be an asset when these students are pursuing their careers. What will be exciting is when, a few years out, we turn to these assistant professors and have them nominate their best students as HASTAC Scholars.

---

11 HASTAC Scholars Discussion, "HASTAC welcomes Howard Rheingold for a discussion on participatory learning" (Aug. 24, 2008), http://www.hastac.org/scholars/forum/8-25-08Rheingold-participatory-learning .

HASTAC is a virtual community of about 1700 members. It is voluntary and very loose. No dues. If you participate, you're likely to be put on the Steering Committee. It is what people want it to be, and decentralization is key. We advertise one another's projects and work and, if we do the

advertising, then the home institution credits HASTAC as one of the contributors to the project. Other viral communities are springing up. At present, I think this is the right way to go. Maybe that will change but, at present, it seems as if it would be exactly wrong to try to capture the flux. It's better, I think, to try to ride this moment of transition as the Information Age changes just about every aspect of social interaction, political organization, intellectual exchange, and, more slowly but surely, education. Personally, I think it would be wrong to institutionalize because institutions move far more slowly than the Information Age. We live in a time where we all need to relax a little and accept the fact that we live in one of the world's great, epistemic eras of communication and information and intellectual transformation. We cannot stop it. And I, for one, wouldn't want to. The best we can do, as true intellectuals, is for each of us to work to understand how what we are doing best capitalizes upon, helps us all to understand, and in other ways appreciates the fact that we live in one of the most exciting and challenging ages in recent human history. As we HASTAC'ers keep saying, this is not the age of technology. It is the age of information. We educators, we human and social scientists, need to accept that this is our age and take up the challenge.