

Higher education students' experiences of digital learning and (dis)empowerment

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This paper focuses on learning practices in higher education in relation to a digital participatory culture. Using key principles of critical education, especially those related to participation, communication, transformation and contextualisation of learning as forms of learning autonomy, the research set out to explore higher education students' sense of agency online – or lack of it – as part of their formal learning practices.

The research found that although students were proficient web users, they did not exercise their learner agency beyond what they assumed to be expected of them, thus evidencing the stability of their learning habitus in relation to the learning conventions associated with the academic field. More surprisingly however is perhaps students' perception of the web not only as a space of student participation but also one of student surveillance, a real obstacle to meaningful learning.

Keywords: digital practices, digital education, empowerment, surveillance, habitus, doxa

Introduction

Since the advent of the *read and write* web (O'Reilly 2015), a rhetoric of empowerment and participation began to attach itself to formal education (see Selwyn 2011). This has been reflected in literature in the field of learning technology, now popularly rebranded as digital education. In the context of liberal forms of education, it is relevant to imagine the web as an instrument of educational change because of the lower barriers it provides for user engagement. These observations have often been translated into assumptions of the web as an appropriate space for autonomous learning and authentic learning contexts, where agents can exercise their power and experience with a high degree of freedom as learners and informed citizens. More recently, online learning has also been connected to digital culture practices (Miller 2011) that rely heavily on individuals' creation of content and contribution of ideas as forms of participation (Jenkins et al. 2007).

While it can be claimed that the web has affected the social world in general, and created spaces for the self-organisation of knowledge networks (see Castells 2012), it is less clear how it impacts individuals' formal educational practices within the boundaries set by educational institutions. This is not to say that research on the integration of technology in the classroom is not abundant. Yet, it more often than not reports on its advantages or disadvantages rather than elaborating on how pedagogical practices are construed in relation to and in direct context with the digital, more specifically the web. Much of the focus so far has been on pedagogical approaches that are regarded as suitable to the implementation of digital education. These encompass student-centred approaches, forms of collaboration and personalisation of learning that aim to recapture and apply the legacies of critical thinkers such as Freire (1970) and Illich (1971) in a new, reconfigured context, that of the digital. The interpretation here is that digital technology is inherently transformative. Additionally, there is a plethora of publications on student expectations of classroom teaching with technology (see for example, Duncan-Howell 2012; Waycott et al. 2010). This derives from the need to connect education to the 'real world' and bridge students' day-to-day experiences with the digital with their educational activity. Yet, very little research seems to elaborate on the impact of such educational proposals on learners' actual learning practices.

It is with these observations in mind that we set out to examine students' actual learning practices not only in relation to their use of the web for their learning, but also to the broader set of assumptions about the transformative nature of technology as applied in educational contexts. . In order to fulfil the purpose of developing a critical understanding of the interplay

between higher education students' digital practices and their approaches to learning, a three year study involving higher education students was conducted. The article explores participants' sense of autonomy and agency – or lack of it - in the context of a digital participatory culture applied to formal learning practices.

This introduction is followed by a review of the main principles concerning digital educational approaches. The methodology underpinning the study is then presented and the findings of the research analysed. Finally, we discuss the findings in light of Bourdieu's conceptual framework of practice.

Digital education: participation as learning

Critical conceptions of learning and teaching had already been extensively developed before the advent of the web, especially through critical pedagogical paradigms that place an emphasis on participation, communication, transformation and contextualisation of learning with the learner at the centre of transformative change (see, for example, Giroux, 1988). Inherent to these basic principles is an intention to change power relations amongst agents, especially through the emancipation of those who are, in Freire's words (1970), living and learning under a culture of domination. In this vein, critical pedagogies can be regarded as a response to social struggles and injustices that are reproduced by education systems. That regard learners as consumers of information.

It is in this regard that Freire (1970) launched his critique against what he named banking education; a passive form of teaching and learning that eschews student *conscientização* (74), in essence, critical consciousness. To counteract this trend, Freire proposes a problem-posing type of education that is dialogical in nature (Freire 1970, 84). Whereas banking education obstructs creative inputs by taming individuals' actions and avoiding negotiation of meaning, problem-posing education regards individuals' creations and contributions as meaningful and critical acts of learning. The objective of problem-posing education is thus that of critically engaging the learner in the analysis of the social reality that surrounds him/her so that s/he can act on it. As a form of empowerment, problem-posing education emphasises not only critical agency, but also active and democratic citizenship.

The proposal of such an archetype of education is not very different from that suggested in digital education literature (see, for example, Sharpe et al. 2010). The web as an apparent unrestricted space of consumption and production of information opens up new opportunities for collective intelligence and congregation (Wenger et al. 2009) where agents are expected to be in charge of their own learning. Behind this celebration of agency is a suggestion of a form of empowerment. Online, however, this enactment of agency is dependent on individuals' own dispositions to participate in such digital spaces. A participatory culture is epitomised by acts of creation and sharing, with individuals acting as both contributors and supporters of other's creations (Jenkins, et al. 2016) as part of the social connections that are therein formed; the vital ties that bind online users together. The ethos of a participatory culture online is thus as much an individualised act as it is a collective endeavour.

There is no doubt that both critical education and the digital participatory culture seek the democratization of knowledge and the emancipation of the learner. Nonetheless, it is crucial not to confuse the opportunities the web provides for agency with aspirations of equal participation and status amongst participants. Even though the web has been developed with a set of democratic values in mind, a 'truly participatory culture' is far from being established online (Jenkins et al. 2016, 182) as structural struggles and inequalities are often mirrored in the digital world, with dominant groups commonly taking central stage in this process. Even though learning spaces online are formed beyond geographical and temporal boundaries, they are not impervious to the power systems that pervade other spaces of social life. Yet, there are ways to respond to this type of domination. As Jenkins et al. (2006) emphasise, 'the more

participatory contexts we create, the more opportunities we create for meaningful participation' (182). It was with this in mind that the teaching approaches presented in this article were developed.

The logic of digital practices

Just like Freire, Bourdieu and Passeron (1977; 1979) too provided a critique to the formal education system of their country. These critiques can be, and have been, applied to other (inter)national realities. Freire appraised the Brazilian educational system as dehumanizing and Bourdieu and Passeron understood French education as a reproductive scheme representative of the taste and habitus of the leading classes. Nonetheless, their perspectives on what role education can play in the liberation of the learner diverged. Freire regarded education as the answer to the issues derived by the educational system itself in that education has the potential of emancipating and humanizing the individual. Bourdieu and Passeron, on the other hand, deemed education as a threat to genuine individual autonomy and agency. What they all agreed on is that the structure of formal education is indeed a form of domination, more concretely, a form of oppression and symbolic violence, respectively (Burawoy and Holdt 2012).

The web as an alternative space for learning has often been characterised as inherently democratic, because of the availability of tools and approaches that are available to citizens. The web has equally been defined by the opportunities it provides for open collaboration (Conole 2012), and individual and collective voice. It is thus not surprising that the web has been identified as disruptive (Kop 2008), because of the ways it seems to defy the established norms of some fields of practice, education included. Its lack of structure or tradition allows for more creative practices and different types of membership and contribution which in essence is what characterises a digital participatory culture. Although the combination of the web and education has the potential to create different contexts for learning (Dias de Figueiredo, 2007), it is not a given that the web can serve education in transformative ways. Digital participatory learning as a form of liberation and a way of encouraging learners' critical engagement with the world is as much dependent on what the web enables and it is on the attitudes and values of the agents that learn in those spaces (Costa and Harris 2017). It is in this sense that it is important to evaluate the 'inflated rhetoric' that surrounds the digital and its connection to education (Buckingham 2013, 1991).

Hence, for the purpose of this research, we borrow from the work of Bourdieu key concepts, especially field, habitus and doxa to operationalise the web as a social space and a field of practice. Following Bourdieu's writings, we work on the interpretation that the perception of any given social space is a 'product of a double structuring' process (Bourdieu 1989, 20) encompassing objective and subjective constructions of reality; one in which the properties attributed to agents and the schemes of perception and appreciation that define them are ever present in the spaces in which they interact (ibid), sometimes in more conscious ways than others. As a new locus of action, the web represents an additional, sometimes alternative, space in which 'new forms of power, status and control emerge [and from which] new forms of inequality' (Jenkins et al. 2016) can derive. Even so, the web does not represent an institutionalised structure with recognised norms. In fact, at first sight, the web may present itself as a free social space able of accommodating different cultural practices and its distinctive agents. This diversity is a reflection of the different capitals— social, economic, cultural and symbolic — that different individuals bring to the digital sphere as their embodied habitus. This however is not to say that the web is devoid of a structure, but rather that the configuration of practices online may seem less organised because they are not institutionalised. Individuals' practices, on the other hand, may already be entrenched by institutional rules. Such

observations can lead to interpretations of the web as a space with a higher level of freedom to act when compared to other spaces of practices that are shaped by a regulatory hand.

In this vein, individuals' practices – digital or not - are, to a great extent, a reflection of the dispositions, or the habitus they 'carry across the varied contexts of their daily lives' (Bennett and Matson 2010, 326). This understanding of habitus as accumulated and transferrable dispositions from and to different social spaces is important to the understanding of higher education students' learning practices online as it places them in relation to the different learning contexts that shape their academic experience. It can be said that the social world is 'constructed in different ways according to different principles of vision and division' (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 19). For example, the role of the web and digital participatory culture can be approached differently by educators and students, thus creating not only social but also intellectual distances between the different groups of agents.

The understanding of individuals' own logic of practice can be further advanced by the application of the concept of doxa 'as the embodiment of beliefs belonging to a field of practice' (Costa and Murphy 2016, 52), i.e., as uncontested habitus. Doxa is herein a pertinent lens of observation when studying which digital practices students consider relevant to their education and which ones they reserve for other realms of their lives. Research on digital dissonances (Hrastinski and Aghaee 2012) has reported about the problematic of transferring digital practices from one social space to another. Students often do not associate their engagement with the web with formal education. This unconscious demarcation between digital practices exercised in formal education and those practised elsewhere (Clark et al. 2009) is a clear indication that the digital world enjoys of different statuses in different fields of action.

The next section presents a summary of the research methods. It is followed by the analysis and discussion of the findings.

The study

The results and discussion presented in this article are drawn from a bigger study on curricular design practices with the web and the digital practices inherent to it (see, for example, Costa and Harris 2017). For the purpose of this paper, we explore the learning practices of higher education students enrolled to a module on 'Living and working on the web' as part of an optional module offered in a University in the UK. The module ran once a year for a period of 3 years and was taken by 87 students.

In order to conduct empirical work on students' learning practices online, an ethnographic action research (EAR) approach was conducted with regards to the design and implementation of the module in question. The module was organised to provide students with relevant content about the digital, but also, and above all, encouraged students to adopt learning approaches that encouraged their critical engagement and participation with their studies.

The combination of ethnography (a way of understanding cultural practices) and action research (a form of inquiry to nurture new practices) (Tacchi et al. 2003) fulfilled the objective of developing an iterative research approach (Tacchi et al. 2009, 4). The choice for an EAR design derived from the importance of working within the realm of reflective practice with both the researchers and the researched. Reflection was a crucial component for the research as it allowed to explore the circumstances in which practices occurred and how practices could be improved. Reflective practice is a common feature of online participation; a form of recording and sharing experiences, and establishing a presence online. The implementation and study of the module took place in two complementary stages that were repeated and refined every time the module ran.

The first stage consisted in linking the features of the digital culture with critical learning activities. Drawing on the work of Jenkins et al. (2009) and Miller (2011), we designed

a diet of learning activities that aimed to engage participants with the digital in participatory and dialogical ways as evidenced by the table below.

| Digital participatory culture features | Critical pedagogy learning activities |
|---|---|
| Creation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Proposals of learning activities (challenges) that require learners’ production of content via their blogs and other platforms, such as video logs and animations. |
| Sharing | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Design of sessions where students could present and discuss their creations with their peers and wider audiences. - Built-in peer-comment as part of their blog reflective activities as a form of dialogical learning. - Encouragement of sharing practices and resources via networks such as Twitter , as part of their learning process |
| Social connectivity | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Proposal of learning opportunities across different spaces and networks, by encouraging students to participate in relevant knowledge networks online. - Encouragement of networking practices in and beyond the classroom via network sites such as Twitter and established #tags |

The second stage of preparing the research consisted in finding methods which would allow us to access students’ digital learning practices. Following Tacchi et al. (2009) work, we adopted a participant observation position within the research project as a form of continuously reflecting on and recording what was being observed. Field note taking, as part of the observations, became a form of documenting what was observed and also of developing a research routine that would keep us constantly engaged with the project not only as educators, but also as researchers (Angrosino 2007).

Participants were asked to keep a reflective blog as part of their participation in the module. The blog served to record and reflect about their own practices and approaches to learning on the digital and were given the opportunity to experiment with different forms of online communication such as text, audio and video. These students’ productions became research data valuable to the project as it captured participants’ own voices and opinions of the module at the same time it provided evidence of their digital learning practices.

Participants were also given a questionnaire where they could report about their experiences and express their opinions about the module anonymously.

Research ethics was granted to conduct this research and all research participants featured in the study were informed of the intent of the project and provided consent to their participation in the study.

For the analysis of the research data, a thematic approach within an interpretive stance was adopted. This allowed us to explore patterns, consistencies and contradictions across the information collected. The findings of the data collected are analysed in the section below.

Findings

Two key findings surfaced regarding students' engagement and perceptions on the digital for educational purposes. The first finding relates to the observation that students were ambivalent about the ways they should engage in a participatory environment that was mediated by the digital. Students are often said to appreciate more autonomous ways of learning, especially when these include new forms of digital communication (Glušac et al 2015). Even though research participants welcomed such pedagogical proposals, they did so with a mix of enthusiasm and a certain level of hesitation and uncertainty. This is particularly evidenced by the learning habitus that research participants develop throughout their 'educational career' and which do not necessarily include the web as either a tool or environment for learning.

The second key finding of this study has to do with students' relation to the digital world not only as a space of participation and voice, but also as a form of exposure. Although participants often reported on the benefits of online communication as a form of free expression, they also reflected on the vulnerabilities they felt about making their participation visible via digital channels of communication. We depict these aspects below through an analysis of the findings and related discussion. We draw on direct quotes from the research participants as evidence of research findings. As a form of preserving participants' confidentiality, and when possible, we used quotes from anonymised sources, such as the anonymous questionnaires, instead of other forms of communication that were open to the public.

Ambivalence and digital learner autonomy

In general participants seemed to enjoy the proposed learning approaches, especially because of the novelty that is associated with learning on the digital, as the quotes-example suggest:

I enjoyed being able to get in touch with others via the hashtag and I thought creating our own blog was unique (Anonymous Questionnaire)

I enjoyed the fact that so many components of the module were online.... [and] writing the blog posts as they are a way of expressing our opinions on different topics which we don't usually get the opportunity to do in other classes (Anonymous Questionnaire)

However, students were often less certain of the forms of participation and contribution that were associated and expected with this way of learning:

(...) I was not expecting to have to write weekly reflections. It was very intimidating. (Blog10)

I found the task of setting up my own blog quite daunting as it isn't something I ever considered doing. It is a style of writing that I am not used to but being able to read each other's blogs and learn from what they have done is something I found invaluable. (Blog 44)

The digital learning approach employed for the module placed a strong demand on students' active input, because of its emphasis on participatory approaches to learning. This redefined students' engagement with academic modules not only through space, but also through time, as learning and participation in the module was not limited to a given scheduled slot. Such

difference in the organisation of learning was often regarded as an interference with students' established study routines, as reflected by some participants where their lack of participation was concerned:

The University requires that we as full time students have a specific number of contact hours (Anonymous Questionnaire)

People focused on their blog posts in between classes and on their other coursework for other modules which left no time to interact online in between classes (Anonymous Questionnaire)

Digital forms of participation and education not only require a constant engagement with what is being learnt, but it also render a higher level of exposure and visibility because learning through participatory approaches requires constant and observable forms of contribution. These were aspects of digital participatory learning that many students found difficult to engage with as their learning practices seemed to be better adjusted to standardised modules in which the process of learning is more often than a private rather than a public activity.

Notwithstanding the lack of sustained online activity in between scheduled classes as part of their engagement with the module, students reported that they felt more at ease with online formats than they did with face to face ones as depicted in the following theme. This somehow shows a participation paradox regarding the different approaches students adopt to their participation during class time, depending if it was organised online or in a classroom setting. As Barak et al. (2008) assert 'it is well known that people say and do things in cyberspace that they ordinarily would not say or do in the face-to-face world' (p. 1870). In our case this difference in behaviour is not in any way pernicious. In fact, it evidences what Suller (2004) would call a positive disinhibition effect that generates interactions between peers and tutor as part of the learning experience. Nonetheless, it is unclear if this form of performance gives way to a sense of personal empowerment as students' online participation is mostly limited to scheduled class sessions, thus not fulfilling one of the key objective of critical education as unhampered participation (Illch, 1971).

Online learning as exposure

In general, students were enthusiastic about the online sessions offered as part of the module. They reflected that the online sessions:

worked more effectively as I felt I could voice my opinions easily (Anonymous Questionnaire)

[were] much easier as you feel your opinion and comments matter more, no one is there to scrutinise you (Anonymous Questionnaire).

Such statements were particularly justified because of the degree of comfort the online medium provided to the students when engaging with both the lecturer and their peers. This type of evidence was made clear via the online questionnaire, where students were asked to reflect on their participation in the course:

I feel more confident in speaking out online rather than in class (Anonymous Questionnaire)

You have more confidence to speak over twitter as the boundaries are blurred and I felt much more comfortable to ask questions and answer questions via twitter (Anonymous Questionnaire)

The connection of online participation with a strong sense of confidence provides some insights into the perceptions of power structures that may be associated with classic classroom dynamics between students and tutors. The online world is often regarded as a space where participation can be developed in more democratizing ways (Dahlberg, 2001) and where confidence is enacted through a perception of status neutralization (Barak et al., 2008). This may well be because of the lack of physical contact or a disembodied imagination of their social position within this type of learning experience. Such perceptions can lessen the sense of authority some individuals may convey in relation to others when playing different roles as part of an educational experience. Online as a space of socialisation can seem to convey a more diluted version of power dynamics and thus convey a certain sense of parity where individuals regard each other as participants rather than students and tutors.

The other aspect that we can take into consideration is that online participation even when practised synchronously does not have to be immediate, thus providing users with time and space for reflection, which is often a preference for introverts (Myers and Myers, 1980). The pressure to participate is eased by the distance the screen provides:

Contributing online gives you the time to properly think about your answer and compose it the way you want. It is also less intimidating as sending an answer on Twitter as it doesn't feel as much of a big deal as contributing an answer in front of the lecturer and the whole class (Anonymous Questionnaire)

Hence, online participation can also be regarded as a safe space. Even though it can provide visibility to the participant, it can also present a degree of flexibility regarding formats of contribution that are more conducive to introvert dispositions. Research points out that introverts may find 'their real me' more easily online (Amichai-Hamburger et al. 2002) because of the different forms of expression that the web enables:

I prefer online as I am shy and therefore felt I could participate more online (Anonymous Questionnaire)

Nonetheless, online contribution seems to be regarded by students as a form of class participation, or presence, rather than a form of empowerment and learning. Research field confirm confirmed that:

Students seem to feel more comfortable contributing to the discussion online (...). ...they are quite 'at home' contributing to the class discussion via Twitter, often asking for more questions to be asked during the session as an opportunity for participation. However, this interaction, which amounts to hundreds of tweets in one single session, soon dies out once the session is over. Online interactions only seem to happen during class time (Researcher 1, Field Notes)

This last observation by the researcher seems to be justified by one of the participants who states that the:

Lack of online interaction [between classes] is possibly because people didn't feel the need to and thought they could slip under the radar. (Anonymous Questionnaire)

We can herein infer that although the web provides individuals with new forms of expression, it does not automatically endow students with a sense of agency. In the presence of formal education requirements, the tutor still holds a distinctive position within the educational hierarchy:

I think people [the other students] might have been hesitant to start a discussion/interaction between classes because they hadn't seen anyone else post anything besides the lecturer. (Anonymous Questionnaire)

The web may blur boundaries, but it does not obliterate them completely. These become ever more pronounced when individuals realise that their contributions online are observable and can be judged:

A possible reason [why people did not participate between classes] was that people may have been unsure of their answers and therefore were unsure what to comment out in the open. (Anonymous Questionnaire)

The quote examples used above show that online communication can work in favour of students' participation in that it provides them with a platform for exploration of their own voice. Nonetheless, online communication, as a performative act, is also a form of exposure that students prefer to experience in more cautious ways because of the visibility that it provides. The web as a locus of participation is not only a space where students can develop their voice, but also a place where their voice can be open to scrutiny.

It is visible that participants' enthusiasm for a digital participatory approach as part of their learning provision derives from the uniqueness of the approach proposed. However, this novelty is soon replaced by confusion as to their role as learners and the way their learning should be conducted.

The perceptions participants shared about being able to more freely develop a voice online than face-to-face is a curious aspect. It appears to indicate that the screen forms a kind of a shield that, at the same time it seems to give participants some sense of protection, it allows them to project their ideas to a wider audience. In this sense, the web as a stage of participation seems, at first sight, to enhance students' participation more than it disrupts. However, the visibility developed on the web also leads to a greater sense of vulnerability and caution given the exposure inherent to the publication of ideas online. Even though participants' contributions may be seen as disembodied – in the absence of the physical bodies - their voices are not, because their participation is not anonymous. This in itself can ensue internal conflicts regarding the responsibility that is implicitly placed on participants' contributions as an example of critical learning. This raises the question if the web has, in the context of this study, been used and regarded by students as a tool of power or empowerment.

Following this analysis of the research data, we will now engage in a critical discussion of the findings. We start by employing the work of Bourdieu and where his work presents

shortcoming we will employ the work of other theorists to provide a more encompassing reflections on the findings.

Discussion

The purpose of critical education is that of liberating the learner, in other words, of providing them with the tools and attitudes to take ownership of their learning. With regards to a participatory culture this implies the development of strategies that allow students to transform their online participation into meaningful acts of learning (Illch 1971, 44). The Freirean problem-posing method does not differentiate between the activity of the teacher and that of the student, which in Irwin's view means to have 'doxa (opinion) superseded by logos (knowledge)' (2012, 58). The conversion of doxa into knowledge has the purpose of developing agents' critical consciousness (Freire 1987, 87) in their engagement with the social world and their education. Additionally, the goal of this transformation is also that of changing agents' status from recipients to creators of information as a form of agency.

This type of critical participation is one of the main drivers of a digital culture and yet such critical participation is not evidenced in our study. In the case of our study it was particularly visible that participants were not ready to fully change their learning practices from consumers to producers of knowledge. Students showed a learning habitus typical of more conventional teaching and learning relationships which are often punctuated by a specific time and place as part of an academic routine that has historically gained universal acceptance (Bourdieu 2000, 88), i.e. its taken for granted structure. This doxified approach further meant that participants strategically – but perhaps unconsciously - adjusted their learning practices to follow what they perceived to be the rules of the module as if it were a game in which they played. More specifically, students focused particularly on activities that counted towards their learning credits and which carried the weight of assessment. Student thus organised their practice to comply with the assessment activities, as for example, the writing of weekly blogposts, even though they did not feel entirely at ease with such activities. Yet, they showed far less commitment in engaging in participating online for the purpose of the module between scheduled classes. Although the blogging activities can be regarded as forms of participation and production of knowledge – and indeed they are forms of knowledge contribution - it was perceptible that students' engagement in such proposed practices was a direct and strategic response to curricular activities validated by assessment rather than a step towards autonomous learning. As Bourdieu (1991) reminds us, 'by virtue of the habitus, individuals are already predisposed to act in certain ways, pursue certain goals, avow certain tastes and so on' (17). Changing those predispositions takes more than a new proposal of practice, it requires a greater awareness of the taken for granted approaches, which Freire (1970) called *conscientização*. Without evidence of this level of conscious action as a form of empowerment– which we did not find in our research – we can never adequately interpret participants' actions as premeditated, precisely because their practices are conducted in the *silence of the doxa* (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 131).

Students' doxic approach prevented them from fully developing a sense of agency that matched the imperatives of a digital culture. The logic of practice proposed for this module established a clear difference in relation to the practices students have developed and embodied as part of their studies in other modules. Such difference in practice became a hidden barrier to participants' adopting a participatory approach to their studies. It is important to note that this unconscious resistance to online participation does not seem to be a reflection or lack of appropriate literacies to learn on the web. It is rather a reflection of participants' learning habitus and their strategic understanding of how academia generally works.

Students' investment in the academic game implies a good knowledge of the rules of the field of academia as well as the role they play in it, their status. In our particular case, it is the academy and not the web that regulates participants' studies. It is therefore no surprise that their learning habitus is more oriented towards the dominant ways of playing the game than it is to the opportunities the web presents for learning in a more autonomous way. Logics of practice 'are defined in the relationship between habitus and objective structures inherited from history' (Bourdieu 1998, 53). Academia, for that matter, overrules the web as a space of learning because of its long tradition and its legitimate power (Costa 2013). The result is a preference for following the rules assumed to belong to the academy as they provide students with a stable structure of practice that is known to them and which they have learnt to navigate. This familiarity with the 'rules of the game' provides students with a higher degree of reassurance regarding the approaches they take. Bourdieu (1990a) names this *illusio*, 'the tacit recognition of the stakes of the game' (110). It is this recognition of the value of the game that drives participants to invest in what they regard as appropriate or adequate practices. Powering this approach is a false sense of control over the rules of the game which if carried out successfully are expected to yield a higher degree of academic recognition. The field of academia through its doxa undistinguishably exercises power over its actors and reifies *illusio* as achievement. The outcome is a classic example of reproduction of academic practices.

It would however be unfair to say that the web as a field of knowledge production and participation did not generate any interest or change in the way students interacted and learnt in the module under investigation. The main purpose of the module was to raise awareness of different ways of learning through the participatory features the web affords to its users. Even though participants felt it hard to sustain the learning interaction outside scheduled learning hours, online participation during class time was profuse, marking a distinctive difference in relation to interactions with the tutor and peers in face to face contexts. When students set aside time to participate online as part of the module they did so in 'unhampered ways' (Illich, 1971) thus evidencing their capability for agency and dialogue. This discrepancy in relation to students' participation outside class time is worth exploring and reflecting on.

Borrowing from Foucault (1991) the metaphor of the panopticon, we can devise an interpretation of the web that reveals participants' engagement online in a less liberating light and from a more repressive position. Regarding the web as a panopticon means to consider the web as surveillance tool of online behaviours. In our concrete case, the web provides the tutor with access to students' online presence and participation in the context of their education. The effect of web panopticism can thus be understood as a form of power that 'is visible in the form of the central watchtower' (Hope 2013, 35) and which exposes the student, but covers the watcher.

The web when regarded as a panopticon ceases to fulfil the purpose of an emancipatory learning experience, because it jeopardizes the essence of critical agency, that is, autonomy. This is revealed in our research through students' own ambivalence regarding the frequency, value and purpose they attach to their online contributions. The web as a panopticon serves students well as a place of visible participation when that type of performance is needed, as for example, participation during class time. Yet, web panopticism becomes an obstacle to authentic participation because it also works as a space of control that makes explicit students' status in the educational hierarchy, as learners under the gaze of the master, or tutor.

Viewing digital learning through the prism of panopticism inevitably invites a reference to the creation of 'docile bodies' in education (Foucault 1984). The ways in which students in this study shape their learning experiences in strategic ways and navigate the observational aspects of digital environments, certainly points to the disciplined and subjectified self-referenced in the literature (Carlile 2011; Cooper 2014). At the same the level of ambivalence

they exhibit towards their participation and their online activity suggests a more nuanced picture of the strategic learner, one in which Bourdieu's *illusio* and the recognition of the rules of the game comes more to the fore. While the parameters of docility are open to question, such reference to subjectivation and *doxa* surely help to undermine the conception of digital learning as an unhindered and wilful transformative act.

Conclusion

In summary, the web as a panoptic space pays more and better service to power structures through the relationships that are established by agents with different status than it empowers learners with new spaces for dialogue and democratic practice. In this sense, the web seem to imprison more than it is able to liberate in the context of formal education. This is precisely because the web even though it can be considered as a space of democratic participation does not cancel out the power relationships that permeate the educational world. On the contrary, it can intensify them. An act of resistance against the panoptic eye is then a refusal to participate beyond the necessary to keep a relevant position in the field of education.

The web is more and more pervasive of people's daily practices. It is thus expected that our use of technology is becoming more embodied than premeditated. This is particularly visible in the current study when students participate online as evidence of their engagement in the module. They do so with a great level of competence and technical mastery. This however does not necessarily mean participants regard their participation as learning, but rather as a prerequisite to attend the module. In this sense, participation and dialogue do not automatically equate to critical consciousness, as envisaged by Freire. Participants' online participation is in essence a visible effort to conform to the rules of the game, of which attending classes is a distinctive sign of exemplar student behaviour.

Given the lack of bodily presence in online spaces, class attendance is evidenced by tangible forms of participation and self-presentation as a form of creating a sense of 'being there' (Rettie, 2005, p.22). Hence, students' online engagement during class time is a performative act, a manifestation of 'class attendance' which inadvertently results in a greater degree of participation and dialogue amongst students when compared to face to face sessions.

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