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### **Designing open electronic texts in education: positioning theory revisited**

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#### **Abstract**

*A series of investigations into aspects of designing electronic texts is summarised. One aspect is a critical evaluation of existing provision, including educational videos and available software like PowerPoint and Xerte, and a description of our own practice over several years. There is a review of more theoretical work about 'realism' in cinema and in visual ethnography, and effects which include 'positioning' the viewer as passive. We discuss the potential of electronic texts for organising academic material in a more open 'writerly' way than is conventional, and end with suggesting future theoretical inquiry.*

**Keywords:** electronic text, realism, 'writerly' texts, positioning theory, visual media, pleasures.

The main focus of the paper is on the design of electronic texts for educational purposes, including the extent to which the issues and dilemmas that arise either mirror existing issues in pedagogy or are distinctive to the development of electronic materials for learning. In doing this, we pay particular attention to realism and the claims made for the 'realism effect' in popular cultural forms, including the ways in which these popular forms position the viewer or reader to understand any particular text. This discussion is shadowed by the sometimes paradoxical debates about the design of educational processes and the extent to

which they can enhance or inhibit the capacities of students to become critical.

There is a further contextual factor. Discussions about the design of electronic texts are sometimes framed in terms of the extent to which they reproduce some of the benefits claimed for face to face teaching but, as Mayes and de Freitas (2013: 4) point out, the danger is that we need to appreciate that '... digital technologies have the potential to disrupt norms, challenge assumptions ... and usher in completely new forms of learning activity'. We argue that this framing of the discussions is sometimes influenced by convictions that have little to do with electronic texts.

In this paper, we are using the word 'text' to include not just printed material but spoken and visual material as well. Our experience of teaching with electronic texts was in undergraduate and postgraduate modules in which face to face teaching was also taking place.

#### **Technophobia**

The sometimes partisan discussion of electronic texts may be viewed as technophobic in certain respects. University colleagues have suggested the need for, or, indeed, the pleasure of, handling paper copies of texts, especially journals. This view is often accompanied by a committed defence of the virtues of lectures and of conventional seminars, often on the grounds that they permit interaction among students and between students and academics. This sort of interaction, it is claimed, is an essential part of developing critical thinking and learner autonomy. These objections to electronic texts, in our view, are laced with a mixture of doubts about the effectiveness of such texts in matching the benefits of interactions but also matters of pleasure, preference and taste.

There has always been scepticism about some of the conventional forms of interaction in higher education settings. Academic research (Bourdieu *et al.*, 1994) highlights the technical ineffectiveness of the lecture format but also found that students may experience lectures as pleasurable or, indeed, inspiring, at least when attending elite French universities. It is also possible that some students regard the attendance of lectures as ritual participation in some kind of authentic higher education. This may be a legitimate reason to persist with the lecture format but is not one based on educational value but something akin to the soft glow of recognition gained when visiting heritage sights. The benefits of face to face learning are often said to revolve around the ability of the tutor to respond to the specific needs of the learner(s) in his or her sessions using dialogue, negotiation or techniques that allow the learners to become involved in their own learning – to become co-creators of educational value. Casey *et al.* (2002) however, in a study based on local students, offer a critique, suggesting that higher education students even dislike their experience of seminars to the extent that they are viewed as stressful and unhelpful. They prefer the directed tasks of the workshop relative to the

open-ended discussions of seminars in which critical thinking is supposed to emerge. Systematic research into seminar interactions may be helpful. The classic ORACLE studies of group discussions in primary schools (Galton *et al.*, 1990) identified a great deal of teacher-initiated talk, often taking the form of replies to closed questions, in contrast to the benefits claimed for more participatory interaction in the Plowden Report (CACE, 1967).

### Technophilia

In comparison, technophiles embrace an unqualified optimism about the impact of electronic teaching, as a variant of a belief in technical fixes. Tunstall's (1974) review of the early days of the Open University (OU), for example, highlighted the view that television could develop a direct relationship with students, sidestepping all the elitist social constraints of conventional higher education.

Technical fixes inform the enthusiasm for MOOCs (massive open online courses). The materials that comprise the online courses can be provided by universities at very low marginal cost, and it is easy to see the appeal to governments wishing to be seen to offer open access. MOOCs have sometimes taken particular advantage of social media and mobile technology to increase their accessibility (see deWaard *et al.*, 2011). These are important developments, yet technical access cannot be seen as equivalent to open engagement with the materials, we want to argue. The design of the materials is the important issue, and whether they offer knowledge in terms of closed sequences or open networks, or treat learners as 'readers' or 'writers' in the terms we develop below. It is rash to generalize, of course, but according to one survey (Pappano, 2012), the default pedagogy on offer in MOOCs is the televised lecture, sometimes bordering on the standard reusable learning object with its short duration and teacher-led interactive episodes, and we see difficulties with both of those formats. Organizing credentialist assessment, if it becomes possible or cost-effective, will produce further actual limits to potential choice, stratifying knowledge into what does and does not count for assessment purposes.

More recently, advocates of Prensky's (2001) 'digital natives' suggest a strong belief in the capacity of young people to learn from electronic media, as a kind of soft or bio-technical fix, whilst the evidence supporting the claims have proved elusive. Hargittai (2010) has coined the phrase 'digital na(t)ives' to capture the variation of the digital competence of the net generation whilst Prensky himself has diluted some of his earlier claims for a digital divide based on age alone (Harris, 2012).

### Varieties of electronic text

There is a problem in attempting any discussion of electronic texts, deriving from their diversity both in form and content including the simple form of recorded lectures at one end to the complexity of platforms such

as Xerte that have been specifically designed for educational uses at the other. There are also the television programmes produced by the OU working with the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC).

Recorded lectures are widespread and often made available on the Web, rarely deviating from the conventions of educational video that we discuss later, although the production values vary from the sophistication of Technology/Entertainment/Design (TED) talk format to the very low production values of the webinars produced by the Higher Education Academy (see for example *Academic Integrity: Learning lessons and exploring tensions*, 2013). However, the belief that low production values would reduce the appeal of educational video has become less compelling given that even professionally broadcast material can feature amateur, even mobile phone, footage.

Other formats in OU programmes, derived from popular culture more generally, have included quizzes, team competitions, treasure hunts, amateur dramatics, and detective stories. The adoption of such formats, perhaps, deriving from the belief that educational programmes can become 'fun' has long come under criticism. Both Eco (1979) and Ellsworth (1989) have argued that using such popular forms may invite what may be seen as popular readings instead of academic ones and diminish the educational effect. Thus, viewers might be distracted by the sadomasochistic or voyeuristic pleasures associated with commercial 'people show' formats such as talent contests, or embrace conventional but highly debatable notions of knowledge as a series of 'facts' to be acquired, as quizzes often imply. We shall be discussing the pleasures of realism and the realist narrative in particular in what follows, focusing on the way they can produce an uncritical 'knowledge effect'.

There is a wider context for the sorts of reservations articulated by Eco (1979). The discussions about the decline in the status of expert knowledge and authority in modernity (especially Beck, 1992) have led to widespread cynicism as a response to the massive information market offering all sorts of forms of 'strategic communication' (see Sloterdijk, 1984). Educational presentations cannot immediately be separated from the appearance or values of party political broadcasts, warnings about current lifestyles by moral entrepreneurs, self-help programmes, forms of advertising, religious sermons and televangelism, for example.

Of course, all forms of educational text, including conventional ones, are equally likely to encounter this problem of distinctiveness and authority and the need to compete with other forms. The usual design solution to mark the distinctiveness of educational materials and to try to force a nonconventional reading is to demand suitable interaction from the user, but it could be argued that interactive commercial media, like electronic games, still offer something similar. More promising might be to think about the context of use, to signal to

the user that this is not conventional material and it requires a specifically educational stance. Users of educational video may recommend the incorporation of student tests and assessment, for example. The use of conventional educational settings might be helpful here: lecture theatres, people who look like academics, university logos and so on. Our own solution, which is obviously still only a partial one, is to embed electronic text, including commercial videos, in unconventional formats (discussed below) which display a clear educational intent.

It would be good to be able to turn to solid empirical evidence to assess whether conventional or critical readings are common, but evaluation is usually limited and variable. Using the most basic measure of counting users and asking for their reactions led to some dismay at the OU in its early days when it appeared that few students bothered to watch the expensive television programmes, and those that did found very little of use (Harris, 1987). Although the use of educational television in schools has been more extensively studied, much of the research involves basic data such as response from teachers. The exception here may be the extensive analysis of *Sesame Street* that highlights positive findings on educational impact (Fisch and Truglio, 2000), usually measured in the form of test scores, but there is still much controversy. Mattelart (1985) and Kinder (1991) questioned long ago how children read the similarity of educational sequences to advertising, for example. Again, more detailed research may be necessary, in particular if that research is able to identify and isolate some of the variables we discuss below. Given the substantial initial investment of funds in producing electronic texts, especially video, cost-benefit analyses of various kinds (Gilhespy, 2011), comparing different textual forms, seems particularly overdue.

### Reusable Learning Objects (RLOs)

The extensive discussion and development that accompanied a strong interest in reusable learning objects (RLOs) has raised a number of new ways of thinking about educational text and its forms. Pegler's (2013) account of the history of open educational resources starts with reusable learning objects and their capacity for widening access to learning. The interest was generated initially by versions of the 'skills agenda', and some substantial investment in the production of RLOs, including some for use at the unfortunate University for Industry, an initiative that was aimed at people who had not really benefitted from formal education, but had little impact and was abolished (Extending access to learning through technology, 2006).

An early idea was that discrete skills could be taught in much smaller units and that electronic formats would permit students to proceed at their own pace and to revisit the material when required. Our view was that programmes offering skills for research methods, or programmes of study skills seemed particularly

appropriate. Our own work is available on the University of St Mark & St John's virtual learning environment. We also produced material for the now defunct CSAP Subject Centre of the Higher Education Academy, and this is available on the JORUM repository supported by the Joint Information Services Committee, and there is a full collection on Harris (nd a). There are basic skill issues in designing questionnaires, for example, or when performing some basic descriptive statistics on data. Conventional research methods modules seemed to be rather unsuccessful at teaching them, in our experience: students often found it hard to see the relevance of such unglamorous skills in advance of their own research, and when it came to do their own research, they did not have effective records of the discussions that had taken place earlier. A better solution was to produce some online material that would be more flexible.

We were also aware that, in the social sciences, there are many methods for doing research, and important critical discussions about them. Covering the range of methods in one conventional module, alongside giving due weight to some of the important philosophical debates was problematical. A possible solution emerged with the idea of producing a wide range of online learning materials – more than would fit in a standard module – that students themselves could access as and when their own research suggested a need. Clearly, we did not regard skills as simple practical devices, and argued that suitable methods required critical discussion. The question then became one of choosing a format to produce standalone electronic teaching materials that would not just be videos of lectures: skills and critical discussions need practice and consideration at a pace controlled by users.

### PowerPoint and Producer

Our first thoughts were to produce a series of PowerPoint presentations. These can be developed as standalone materials, using the ability to add notes to the slides to extend discussion and recommend reading, just as might happen in a conventional face-to-face presentation. We were aware of the debates about the use of PowerPoint (Harris, 2011) and the claim that it constrained educational arguments. We also discovered Microsoft Producer, an optional add-on for PowerPoint, which extended the possibilities considerably. Producer offers a range of templates to display video, audio, conventional text (in HTML) and PowerPoint slides, and, most interestingly, templates that offer all four channels at the same time. The software was 'free' to registered users of PowerPoint and offered opportunities to customise the templates, including changing the size of the elements according to intended use. These possibilities produced further thinking about the advantages and disadvantages of specifically multimedia formats, with videos running simultaneously with a slide show, for example. In particular, we began to think of using different channels to offer different sorts of output, to break with the conventional view that the channels should rigidly correspond so that, for example,

a text panel would display a literal transcript of the speech in the video.

Also, there is a largely unexamined convention in educational materials to use the audio channel for speech, again, usually just the speech of the actual speaker appearing on screen. We experimented with different sorts of music tracks on the audio channel to accompany study skills materials in PowerPoint slides, for example. We were aware of claims that people learn better when relaxed, and included soothing music, although we recognised that subjective tastes may be important (Harris, 2011). We also thought that video could be used to supply data for analysis suggested in text boxes. A clip of extreme sport skiing was used to test out the analysis of the pleasures of risk as suggested by Lyng (1990) in his sociological analysis of sky-diving. This was accompanied by an academic summary of the work (see Harris, nd b).

Video was also used to increase pleasure, attention or involvement. With this end, we accompanied advice about exam revision and the need for motivation with 'found' video featuring people overcoming risk and danger as they engaged in BASE jumping, free climbing, or driving cars to the top of dangerous tracks (see Harris, nd c). We were aware that students may find conflicting material distracting, but Producer permitted users to switch off any of the channels. Materials could also be replayed, of course, if anyone felt they had missed out some elements of the learning object.

### **Xerte**

Producer also had some important limits, however. For one, it would only run with compatible Microsoft software and seemed to be subject to technical problems that led to slow download speeds. Finally, a persistent doubt remained that Microsoft may discontinue its support of the product. Fortunately, a new development was available in the form of particular instructional learning software developed at Nottingham University, Xerte. The development of the software was supported by the Joint Information Services Committee under the TechDis stream and designed to cater especially for students with particular problems such as dyslexia. The early versions of this free software required some knowledge of coding but were soon supplemented by a series of convenient templates, offering the chance to display text, to upload audio or video, and to offer various ways of interacting with the material. Designers could include many options, including some useful diagnostic tests involving multi choice questions, or sorting options into the right order, as well as pausing moving images to add comments. Xerte also provides users with a great deal of control allowing students to use the materials in different ways. For example, students may wish to skim through the main argument, others may diverge at particular points following up suggested readings or activating hyperlinks to further electronic material. Hyperlinking allowed us to design learning objects that related to one another as a series of interconnected presentations: one

presentation on social mobility, for example, might be linked to another on leisure and social class. In this way, we felt better able to represent the 'web like' or branching nature of academic knowledge (Kinchin *et al.*, 2008). This may be regarded as an example of the 'pedagogy of abundance' that Weller (2011) has emphasised where the learner has to self-regulate in order to manage the wealth of materials available and may also move away from the formal syllabus.

Once more, there is little known about how users actually interact with such materials. Our own small experiments suggested that students liked Producer learning objects compared to more conventional materials in the form of print (Gilhespy, 2011). An unexpected finding was that some students were capable of disassembling the material back into its constituent channels, so that they could focus on their preferred channel (often audio in this case).

### **Using visual media: realism**

Multi-media options raise some familiar issues of design. The visual element of the multi-media format is often given priority in performing a specifically visual function, as in shots of geological features, landscapes, location shots of specialist machinery, paintings and photographs, or, less obviously, depictions of context to locate individuals and their views. Visual elements are also used to involve viewers by nurturing empathy or identification with people in shot.

The recognition and critique of this process as a research technique informed our discussions, especially the growing popularity of visual ethnography (Gilhespy and Harris, 2010). Substantial claims have been made by visual ethnographers (Pink, 2010 for example) for the additional value offered by visual materials. Claims are made that the visual material contributes to a richer sense of the subjects of research. Amateur video of the subjects of ethnographic research allows non-verbal behaviour to be observed, it is claimed. Human subjects are revealed in their 'natural' surroundings. Various intriguing possibilities have been discussed, including 'walking ethnography', where key informants accompany the ethnographer on a walk around a particularly significant location, and the camera attempts to reproduce their perspectives in a visual way (Pink, 2008).

Essentially, the claim is that visual ethnography gets closer to the reality of the situation. However, claims to deliver a knowledge of reality, realism, have been highly controversial. In discussions of cinema, the argument is that a number of conventional artifices are used to construct and deliver a sense of realism: simply recording 'reality' is the very opposite of what is being done. The various elements including the use of sound and music, the lighting and the framing, the ways that the camera tracks the action as well as the dialogue and the *mise-en-scène* all have their conventions and develop a sense of authentic representation. Even amateur video has its conventions in spite of its low

production values: crucially, the camera seems innocent, unmotivated and neutral, and the use of 'natural' sound, light and locations signify authenticity (Gilhespy and Harris, 2011).

Influential theorists associated with the cinema journal *Screen*, argued that a particular narrative structure was at the heart of cinematic realism. This narrative structure delivered what appeared to be 'the truth' to the viewer. Actual techniques included those already developed in the novel, where, for example, a number of competing perspectives, associated with particular characters, are illustrated, but as the narrative develops we see that one of these perspectives emerges as the truth. We might see flaws in the mistaken characters, or we might be able to see that their perceptions are false by allowing the camera to show us 'what really happened'. One example discussed in McCabe (1981) has one of the characters swearing to the other that they will meet again on the sound track, while the camera shows her packing a suitcase ready to leave. The process of delivering a sense of 'truth' to the viewer carried with it a potentially unwelcome ideological dimension. Analyses included the ways in which, say, assertive women are presented as treacherous in *film noir* (Kaplan, 1998), and how foreigners, especially disabled ones, appear as untrustworthy, in Bond movies (Price, 1992).

Amongst the *Screen* theorists, the work of Laura Mulvey (1975) focused on the depiction of gender in popular films. It was common for the camera to develop 'a male gaze', for example, voyeuristically peeping at women in various states of undress who were pretending that they were not being observed. More subtly, cameras tended to adopt the point of view of male characters, seeing them as the centre of action, exploring their feelings and motivations. In this way, popular cinema was smuggling in more general patriarchal ideology. Mulvey's own films, such as *Amy!* (1980) show alternative approaches: the camera never lingers on the strong female character who often appears at the edge rather than the centre of the screen; the narrative is borne by extracts from diaries and other accounts written by Amy (Johnson) herself; the positioning of the film is undermined by having panels of female viewers discussing the film on camera.

Realist techniques are controversial, and risk 'positioning' the viewer as the passive receiver of a story being skilfully deployed in a way that would engage common sense, or ideological, views. Such passivity delivers definite pleasure, in having existing perceptions confirmed. Crucially, questions arise as to the use of these realist techniques when designing electronic texts for educational purposes. Importantly, the techniques may be used unintentionally, given the dominance of realist narratives in everyday media. The risk is that these techniques would remain immune to any critical intentions in an educational realist piece. While an educational speaker may expect to be judged by the content of the speech as opposed to their appearance, for example, a woman or a member of a visible ethnic

minority may risk the unwanted ideological effects of the male white gaze. The conventional readings of familiar realist texts may transfer over to educational texts and confirm established views after all.

This leads to an argument for doing something unconventional with educational material. There is some work on conventional cinema and its history that is not normally discussed by educationalists. Deleuze (1989) has pointed out that the camera need not just reproduce the naturalistic gaze of the human being, and this was soon realised in early cinema. Tracking shots, deep focus techniques, time lapse, reversals, and slow motion allow representations that diverge from the familiar human view. So does placing cameras in unusual settings, for example, with crane or rig shots (see, for example, *Downside Up*, 1984). Portable equipment such as handheld cameras may heighten the sense of being involved. The issue becomes whether these techniques, that have added so much to the artistic experience of cinema, can be deployed to some extent in the interests of education, specifically to motivate and involve individuals, or deliberately to produce new and challenging perspectives.

For Deleuze (1989), this is precisely where the educational functions of cinema ought to be developed. He admires directors who have attempted to encourage critical thought in the viewer, such as Dziga Vertov (see for example, *Kino Eye*, 1924), through to Eisenstein with his spectacular use of conflicting perspectives in montage to illustrate dialectical thought (as in *Strike!*, 1925). He also respects the French avant-garde with directors such as Godard and his 'irrational' continuity and deliberate clashes between image and sound (see *Six Fois Deux*, 1976). This is art that forces you to think, Deleuze argues: it is philosophy that breaks with common sense views of the world based on the pragmatics of action and its organizing sensori-motor schema.

### Positioning theory and its paradoxes

The concept of positioning allows us to focus on the ways in which learners are constrained or liberated both by the ways in which academic text is actually written but also the ways in which the features of the technology may be setting a frame(work) within which understanding takes place. At issue here are the ways in which the technology may lead to different forms of learning.

We find a version of positioning in current educational practices in the design of learning sequences with specific objectives, featuring deliberately pedagogic activities to achieve those objectives. In this form of highly designed education, the learner is positioned and there is the assumption that outcomes may be determined, or at least framed, in advance of the actual process of the educational activity. The arguments in favour of this form of educational design include ones relating to efficiency, transparency and value for money. Importantly, the design of educational sequences



increasingly has to be available for professional review from the level of overall programme design through to the level of lesson planning.

It is in the context of a higher education system with standardised representations of educational design that our work was taking place, but we were also in a position to design materials that may have a wider application beyond the specific context of our own institution, materials that are now available online. The users of these materials may have engaged in learning for reasons for which we are unaware, perhaps, even learning for its own sake which has been alleged to be the motivation of users of MOOCs courses (Mayes and de Freitas, 2013: 25). We still have no empirical evidence to suggest the purposes to which our materials have been put, or indeed their effectiveness.

A number of commentators noticed that positioning theory actually underestimates the power of viewers to resist. Briefly, the resisting viewer came into prominence particularly when discussing television viewing. Film might be able to dominate the audience by demanding its attention, being projected on a large screen in a darkened theatre, but television viewing takes place in quite a different context, with a number of competing demands being placed on the viewer, such as those arising from the presence of other people, domestic tasks, alternative inputs on other channels, and so on. Television also offered mundane examples of intertextuality, where the content of one programme can easily be contradicted or undermined by the content of another, joined together in a flow of viewing.

Fiske (1987) was able to argue that viewers do possess resources like this that permit them to view critically: he was to call these resources 'popular cultural capital', and he assessed their impact as being sufficient to enable viewers to engage in a kind of production of meaning themselves. In this sense, the texts of television in particular are often 'producerly' in that they permit and encourage viewers to add their own meanings. Such producerly texts were also very successful commercially: *Dallas* is cited, in Ang (1985), as being produced in such a vague and general way, with such simple narratives and stereotyped characters that audiences all over the world, in a wide variety of national cultural contexts, can still add meaning to what it is they are viewing. Sometimes these meanings are even playfully ironic.

Popular cultural capital can clearly be very useful in teaching social science subjects, such as Leisure Studies, in our case, where participants already have wide experience of leisure activities and often considerable knowledge about them. It is possible to use this as a valuable source when inviting critical applications of more theoretical or research-based work. One student we taught was a widely-travelled surfer, for example, and could produce an excellent critical commentary on academic pieces about the pleasures of surfing and other extreme sports. Any educator will also realise that this popular cultural capital is not always used constructively, however, and that the audience can

resist in a negative and unhelpful manner even highly skilled and benevolent attempts to position them. Another student protested that she saw no point in learning how to do academic research because she already knew what worked, for example.

### Learning paradoxes

There is a particular irony in discussing positioning theory in the context of educational techniques. Educators have long been aware of a paradox in trying to deliver critical materials to students. Semetsky (2008) identifies this paradox in ancient Greek thought, where it took the form of realising that critical philosophy produced unintended consequences for students. Some students found the arguments so unfamiliar that they simply dismissed them as having no relevance at all. Others managed to cope with critical philosophy by reading it as being no different from the kind of common sense views that they held already. In both cases, Semetsky argues, learning is blocked.

This paradox has attracted much attention recently through the work of Rancière (1991), who offers a more politicised version. To paraphrase, the problem is that in order to achieve insights into the subtle and manipulative workings of cinema, for example, students have to subject themselves first of all to a powerful didactic apparatus that proposes to teach them critical film theory. We can see the price that has to be paid by students, by considering the work of Deleuze that we referred to above. In one of the better-known works (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004), the authors choose a 'delirious' style and a rhizomatic structure which might not position readers but is almost guaranteed to baffle and annoy them. Their work is extremely dense and 'difficult', involving a complete rejection of common-sense views of the world, but also displaying all the classic signs of elite academic discourse, with many barely referenced allusions to other philosophers, the use of an extremely specialist vocabulary, the deployment of massive assumptions about the knowledge and culture of the reader, and so on. These features make texts like Deleuze's almost completely inaccessible, unless readers are prepared to spend considerable time and effort in attempting to decipher them, while resisting the 'hostility mixed with panic', 'resigned exclusion', 'desperate compromising and echolalia' that elite work produces in non-members (Bourdieu *et al.*, 1994).

Experienced pedagogues might recognise this paradox in terms of discussions about pitching their work at the 'right level of challenge'. Too much challenge, and students exclude themselves, not enough challenge and students find little in the material to disturb the complacency of their own common sense.

### Texts and pleasures

Optimal levels of challenge provide user pleasure. Providing pleasure is often overlooked in designing educational materials but pleasure is important for

motivation as well. There are no explicit guidelines available here, of course, but a useful discussion has been launched by Barthes, in a series of books, (especially 1975, 1977) on the nature of texts, on the difference between 'texts' and 'works' and the pleasures they provide, and on the differences between 'writerly' and 'readerly' texts. Briefly, the distinctions turn on the issue of meaning in the text, and the extent to which the reader can add their own meanings. 'Works' for example, are designed to be consumed with *plaisir* (roughly, a conformist pleasure delivered by a work, gained from following the narrative to its delivery point and responding as intended). 'Works' are closely connected with social practices like those in the world of commercial writing, including literary criticism and notions of authorship, ownership, copyright and the law. By contrast, 'texts' are networks, opening out to readings beyond those intended by the author. Such openness blurs the conventional differences between reading and writing. The reader and the text both play with meaning, rather as a musician plays with a score, both to reproduce it and to embellish, to perform. Similarly, the aim of a 'writerly text' is to make the reader 'no longer a consumer, but the producer of the text' (Barthes, 1975: 4).

It is only conventional literary (and educational) institutions which maintain the difference between producers of the text and users, authors and readers, and we can extend Barthes to think about how new forms of unconventional communication can raise new possibilities. Should we aim to let students only 'accept or reject the text' asked Barthes (1975: 4)? Could we somehow construct a plural text, 'a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds; ... [which] ... has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one' (1975: 6)? Should we re-impose a particular meaning when we read, or assert radical plurality? An active reading delivers pleasure as it pursues systematic digressions, but it is 'a form ill-accommodated by the [conventional] discourse of knowledge' (1975: 13). Could we minimise excessive structuring, as might 'come from a [conventional essay or] dissertation and would close it', going beyond 'secondary school explications' (Barthes, 1975: 77)?

On a more modest level, following the argument of Barthes, Meades (2012: 11) suggests that good creative work offers '(a) ... Mental space – the space that a creator leaves for his spectator or reader or audience to imagine in ... the avoidance of explicit meaning allows the spectator to become complicit, almost to enter into the creative process: the words on a page, the buildings on a street, the marks on a canvas are – if they're any good – electric triggers, synapse prods.' Digital spaces for learning could also be designed on this basis.

Electronic text is ideal here in that it can conveniently stratify textual elements. Materials written at different levels and with different interests can be hyperlinked together, a brief introduction to the topic linked to a more extended discussion, for example, or a piece of

written material linked to a video that might offer some data to analyse. As we suggested above in our discussion of Xerte, hypertext permits academics to display a more complex structure of knowledge to explore instead of the unidirectional path signalled by objectives. All educators know that most students would be interested primarily in gaining good grades, and would find pleasures in doing so. Instead of regretting such instrumentalism, we could offer specific routes that are designed to focus on assignments and reassure students, but also include other options that permit less strategic exploration. We can see this with the collection of academic talks on the European Graduate School channel on YouTube: the serious academic work is carried in the prestigious and extensive publications produced by the famous academics involved, leaving the videos to display playfulness, good humour, self-deprecation and relaxed informality as additional but connected pleasures (see for example Badiou's *Beyond Positivism and Nihilism*, 2010, or Derrida's *The Notion of Stupidity*, 2004).

### Encouraging writerly readers

We have discussed some views suggesting that students can bring with them sufficient cultural capital to be able to find their own way through texts in order to gain pleasurable outcomes, whether they are the offspring of the classic elites, or those supposedly immersed in digital culture and able to feel at home. What about other students who enjoy none of these advantages? We have discussed above the implication that it should be the skilled designer of texts who leads students towards both the immediate uses and the pleasures of reading such texts. It also follows that we do not accept those reasons that students sometimes give to disqualify themselves from the pleasures of reading texts, including claims that they are exclusively kinaesthetic learners.

An obvious source for advice might be the study skills literature. However, Arksey and Harris (2007) found some serious limits with the conventional views. Briefly, they seem to be based far too much on the skills to improve more limited 'surface' learning. In particular, they often do not seem to be aware of the potential of electronic text or even of the many useful software applications such as those that manage bibliographies.

In our view, students need to develop a new set of study skills specifically devoted to the management of electronic texts. We have suggested that hypertext may be produced at the design stage, for example, and there is no reason why students should not develop hypertext of their own at the reception end. Clearly, this is not possible in the writing of a standard paper-based article or book but they could follow their interests to build in all sorts of materials that are not tightly connected. The actual views of the educational designer may evaporate or become invisible in ways that are not always possible in face-to-face teaching, where even the most skilled teacher is likely offer clues to his or her own views or, for that matter, may take the view that is vital that the

values and assumptions of the teacher are made explicit. We have already noted that devices such as Xerte, in template form, permit students to make additions or deletions. Of course we are aware that intellectual property rights, copyright, or the demands of institutions to control their own material might prevent experimentation in this direction. Generally, though, an electronic format enables a particularly convenient collection of written materials, visual and audio materials, and personal reactions in the familiar form of blogs to be collected together, possibly in a free application such as Microsoft One Note, and then eventually to be hyperlinked in various ways. Materials from different sessions or even different modules could be hyperlinked conveniently, as a way of countering the tendency to compartmentalise learning, often within modules.

It would be possible to see this as an extension of the usual varieties of cognitive maps or mind maps, liberating them from the two dimensions of paper and print. As with the claims made for mind mapping, the very activity of making links is a physical prompt for making conceptual links. Clearly, some evaluative research to test these claims would be very useful here too. More generally, some evaluative work on the design of electronic learning materials and the extent to which they facilitate heterogeneous interaction with active, empowered and knowledgeable individuals would be beneficial.

In terms of future work at a more general level, some recent commentators have been tempted to see the multidimensional nature of electronic text as having some philosophical significance, as somehow illustrating some concepts of Deleuze and Guattari (1984) such as 'the body without organs' or the 'rhizome' (see Cormier, 2014). Buchanan (nd) has a sceptical discussion. We also have reservations about reading Deleuzian philosophy as a source of simple metaphors for the immediate description of actual networks (see Harris, 2013) but it would be interesting to attempt to consider conventional and electronic texts as Deleuzian singularities and to trace them to an underlying communicative multiplicity.

### Concluding thoughts

We have considered a number of options in designing electronic texts for the audiences we need to address in social sciences. We have pursued pragmatic inquiry, avoiding both technophobia and technophilia, and focused on practice not Deleuzian philosophical speculation. We see electronic technology as offering a real possibility of escaping the constraints of conventional teaching and learning, as long as it does not simply reproduce conventional forms of pedagogy in its turn. Breaking with those conventions requires reconsidering the standard advice on tightly structuring educational texts and positioning the user. Forms of address found in cinema or literature might display more promising options. On balance, electronic technology offers the best chance to encourage deeper,

more writerly and more pleasurable forms of intellectual engagement.

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