Teaching transmedia to millennials: a critical reflection on the embedding of transmedia skills in the communication curriculum

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What has been labelled the *digital media revolution* is now more than ten years old, but a best practice framework to teach transmedia platforms is yet to be developed. Social media and its role in tertiary education has been extensively researched across multiple disciplines, for example marketing (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2011), journalism (Hirst & Treadwell, 2011) and hospitality (Fortune, Spielman, & Pangelinan, 2011), with a focus on fostering student engagement (Rutherford, 2010) and the notion of digital media platforms as interactive study support tools (Saw, Abbott, Donaghey, & McDonald, 2013; Silius et al., 2010; Wolf, 2010). However, there is little empirical research or conceptual guidelines capturing the challenges and opportunities for pedagogy presented by the continuously changing media landscape, despite the recognition that the higher education workforce is struggling to adapt to these significant changes (Fortune et al., 2011; Manca & Ranieri, 2016). Whilst the millennial generation are often assumed to be digital natives, there is a distinct difference between using technology, understanding technology, and utilising it appropriately in a professional context. Hence, this paper critically investigates communication students' engagement with new technologies (in particular social media platforms) and learning in a transmedia environment. This study is the beginning of a longitudinal project, which aims to develop a comprehensive pedagogical best practice framework to teach transmedia concepts in real-time.

Keywords: transmedia learning, digital natives, public relations

Introduction

Digital media tools and platforms have been utilised within the education context for more than a decade, and their benefits and challenges have increasingly become the focus of scholarly projects. Bass (2012) summarises

> A growing appreciation for the porous boundaries between the classroom and life experience, along with the power of social learning, authentic audiences, and integrative contexts, has created not only promising changes in learning but also disruptive moments in teaching. (p.1)

The focus of this paper is on transmedia as a teaching approach, i.e. not solely the implementation of different technologies and platforms within the education context, but the ability to effectively communicate across multiple platforms and formats, whist using current – ever developing and newly emerging – digital technologies. However, this area is still being explored from the perspective of the gaps in millennials' knowledge and what technologies they engage with the most. Scholarly literature suggests that the role of 'digital' in education is important; however, recent studies (e.g. Flanigan & Babchuk, 2015) have indicated that students are not applying their knowledge of new technologies to their professional learnings as well as educators may have presumed. Within this context, communication students in particular must adapt and understand the nature of technology in order to ensure they possess the skills future employers take for granted, thereby enabling graduate entry and industry readiness, as well as continuing competitiveness in the workplace.

Studies have illustrated that educators are reluctant to embrace new technologies as part of their teaching, citing obstacles such as "cultural resistance, pedagogical issues or institutional constraints" (Manca & Ranieri, 2016, p. 216). This study explores the challenges faced by students due to the continuously changing media landscape and how the higher education workforce may adapt to the rate of change. How to teach transmedia skills in a live environment with practical exposure to the different platforms is also a focus. The aims of this research are to

1. understand the knowledge gap of higher education students when it comes to social media and transmedia strategy and its professional use in organisations; and
2. investigate best practice in teaching social media and transmedia, with a particular focus on the communication discipline.

This study examines students' experience with interactive learning materials presented via Instagram, blogs, videos, Twitter and Snapchat, as well as distributed via more standard teaching platforms, like Blackboard and Moodle.

Transmedia learning in education

The concept of 'transmedia storytelling' was coined by Henry Jenkins and originally introduced in *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (Jenkins, 2006). The initial concept was limited to a film and media focus, but was further refined by Gomez (2016), who expanded the idea of transmedia storytelling to the broader communication context.

Transmedia storytelling is the process of conveying messages, themes or story lines to a mass audience through the artful and well-planned use of multiple media platforms. It is both a technique and philosophy of communications and brand extension that enriches and broadens the lifecycle of creative content.

In the education context, this definition is applied to how students are taught across multiple platforms, thereby enriching the learning experience beyond the classroom environment, in a narrative format. The authors therefore propose *transmedia teaching* can be defined as:

conveying curriculum materials across multiple media platforms to engage students and encourage them to become active co-creators of knowledge, with each platform making its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the course material.

A transmedia approach to teaching follows many of the transmedia concepts defined by Jenkins (2006) and Gomez (2016). Students may enter learning platforms at any point in time without losing the ability to make sense of learning materials. Information is not replicated on platforms; instead, students are encouraged to engage deeper across the multiple touch points. Using a transmedia approach fosters both a participatory culture, where students see themselves as actively contributing to the curriculum content, and also peer collaboration, as they become part of an active online community of learners.

Literature review

While digital technology and its role in tertiary education have been researched in disciplines as diverse as the sciences (Cao & Hong, 2011) library studies (Hicks & Graber, 2010), marketing (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2011) and journalism (Hirst, 2011), research into its use (and even the definition of its use) remain minimal and vary across studies (Lumby, Anderson, & Hugman, 2014). There is a growing body of literature with a focus on fostering student engagement (e.g. Rutherford, 2010), and the notion of digital media platforms as interactive study support tools (Saw et al., 2013; Silius et al., 2010; Wolf, 2010). Ironically, within the discipline of public relations, surprisingly little empirical or conceptual research has been conducted into the challenges and opportunities for pedagogy presented by the changing media landscape, despite the focus on digital communication tools in industry practice.

Technology has disrupted teaching in many ways, not least the availability of digital technology. Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) can be asked of students as more than 80% own laptops (Flanigan & Babchuk, 2015), not to mention handheld devices like tablets and smartphones. This has implications for the ways in which universities teach technology skills within higher education even though educators may no longer need convincing that the use of the digital in education is important (Selwyn, 2015). However, many higher education institutions continue to rely on familiar technologies, like email, and are therefore less likely to endorse the use of social media for teaching and student interaction (Cao & Hong, 2011; Manca & Ranieri, 2016). Legal implications, for example defamatory content, copyright issues or the posting of illegal material, are a primary concern of higher education administrators driving the hesitancy to encourage educators and students to fully immerse themselves in these new technologies, especially given that the law relating to social media is still evolving (Lumby et al., 2014).

Flanigan and Babchuk (2015) propose that the *Net Generation*, whilst skilled at using social media for personal use, have little to no experience in using technology for professional or educational purposes. Burdick (2011) suggests that these *digital natives* call for a rework of pedagogy because they can "piece together information from multiple sources, are intuitive visual communicators, have strong visual-spatial skills and learn best through inductive discovery" (p. 548). Hence a transmedia approach to teaching arguably suits today's learners, as it uses multiple – often highly visual – sources and encourages use and discovery prior to the application of theory.

An extensive review of the general literature related to social media in teaching and learning was conducted by Lumby et al. (2014). They detail several key areas related to the challenges and opportunities of social media in the tertiary setting, arguing that social media can challenge us to ask how we "understand our roles as teachers and our relationship to students" (p. 129). They note the nature of 'private versus public' and 'professional versus social' have fundamentally shifted and blurred with the rise of social media use in everyday life (including higher education) and that there has been a corresponding shift in the way distribution of knowledge is controlled. This study furthers the research undertaken to date, in particular Flanigan and Babchuck's (2015) study into social media and its impacts on academic experiences of university students, and addresses the gap between students' understanding of social media for personal and professional use.

Industry readiness
Serious concerns have been reported in the Australian trade media in regards to communication students' industry readiness. Christinsen (2014) questions the quality of university graduates and their readiness to meet the challenges of 21st century communication, particularly related to social media. The authors argue that a transmedia approach offers students the opportunity to communicate using the technology 'where they already are', i.e. on those platforms and communication channels they prefer and use on a regular basis. The public relations courses at both universities involved in this study utilise platforms that students connect with frequently such as Instagram, blogs, videos, Twitter and Snapchat. Conversely, if individual students were not using these platforms already, they were encouraged to do so in order to enhance their understanding from a professional perspective.

Research Methodology

This is a longitudinal action research project, which investigates students' engagement with new technologies and the learning experience in a transmedia-focused environment. This paper discusses early findings from a cross institutional study, examining two different unit designs and teaching styles (Transmedia Storytelling and Introduction to Social Media). During phase one of the project (November 2015–December 2015), two focus groups were held at Curtin and Murdoch Universities with a total of 11 and three students respectively. A further four in-depth interviews were conducted over the phone. The focus groups were limited to students studying in Perth, Western Australia. It is anticipated that future stages of this project will capture learners at offshore campuses. Interviews and focus groups were transcribed and independently coded via NVivo10 by three of the researchers, allowing triangulation of the data and material for further discussion and reflection.

Transmedia Storytelling is a core unit at Curtin University for students studying a Public Relations major. As a part of the learning experience students are encouraged to engage on different platforms. These platforms have to date included Blackboard, a blog, Snapchat,

Twitter, as well as videos. In a true transmedia approach, the unit material was tailored to each platform and expected different styles of engagement from students. This style of teaching requires a change to the *traditional*, instructor-focused teaching model and signified a loss of 'control' from the educator's point of view in particular, as many of the technologies used were (assumed to be) more familiar to the learners than the instructors. Students are encouraged to operate in a live environment, to be citizens - as opposed to students - and to engage in an appropriate and ethical manner. The corresponding Murdoch unit is a first year unit public relations unit open to students from related disciplines. It covers a range of communication platforms, including Moodle, although in a more controlled environment.

Findings

The aim of the research project is to understand the knowledge gap of higher education students when it comes to social media, transmedia strategy and industry readiness within the context of the communication curriculum at two West Australian universities. The focus of this paper is on transmedia as a teaching approach and how this particular style of teaching influences learning, rather than transmedia content and industry applications.

The assumption of the digital native

In-class observations and study findings confirmed Flanigan and Babchuck's (2015) conclusion that today's students are not as technologically savvy as is often assumed, failing in particular to understand the use of digital platforms beyond their personal preferences. Most students involved in the study did use some platforms already, but predominantly for personal reasons, e.g. to stay in touch with family and friends. Facebook was the most popular platform mentioned; although ironically, it was not embedded as part of the transmedia learning model at either university. Students automatically gravitated to familiar social networks. Within this context, Facebook in particular has been the preferred platform for collaborative projects across the curriculum. In the words of one study participant: "Facebook is what we went to for group work and what we also used in our assignments [....] it was actually pretty useful". What makes platforms like Facebook so attractive to millennials in comparison to traditional learning technologies favoured by universities (e.g. Blackboard and Moodle), is that they provide information in a location where learners already naturally congregate. Whilst traditional models focus on a *push* approach to learning material dissemination (i.e. the instructor publishes whatever s/he deems to be crucial learning content and expects students to seek out the relevant material), social media networks facilitate a *pull* approach, which is more learner centric. This allows timely access to learning material as perceived relevant, without the need for additional logins. Students are alerted to new content without having to specifically seek it out and can decide immediately if they want to engage and/or explore the topic further. Instagram was favoured for similar, personal reasons, but is yet to be fully embedded as part of the transmedia learning experience.

Findings indicate that millennial learners do not feel comfortable with the *digital native* label. Participants were outspoken and honest about the fact that they did not know everything about social media and new communication platforms, as is frequently assumed by both educators and industry representatives (including future employers).

> We may be able to adapt more quickly or respond better [than older generations], but we don't know everything.

I think older people can just assume we can just do anything on social media. I don't think I can, [...] there's so much more for me to learn. I know the basics and I'm sure if I wanted to learn more I'd be able to learn a lot easier than say my mum or my grandma, but I wouldn't call myself this person that knows everything about social media [just] because I was born in this generation.

An embedded delivery mode

Reassuringly, students' feedback showed that usage and exposure changed dramatically during the course of the semester, as learners were actively encouraged to explore multiple platforms. Many reported becoming more conscious of their personal digital footprint, as well as gaining an overall more strategic understanding of how digital platforms can be used in a professional context.

> I think I did already have an understanding of social media but not how it could be applied in a business context.

The embedded delivery mode and hands on exposure to different platforms encouraged students to venture beyond their familiar environments and preferred technologies.

> …the actual delivery method was all about transmedia, so there was a blog, Snapchat, shared videos […] We had to produce videos, […] I think that helped the learning process.

However, the link to actual assessment outcomes and marks equally emerged as significant, as the majority of students made strategic decisions in terms of where they should invest resources and time. Nevertheless, deep immersion in the technologies and hands on, real-time exposure appear to be key factors to encourage student engagement.

> The two things I loved about the unit were that the actual delivery method was all about transmedia. I think that helped the learning process. It would not have worked at all if it had just been textbooks throughout the semester.

> I think the good thing about the transmedia unit itself is the actual elements of it because you can't teach social media, I don't think it's possible until you're actually in it and have those experiences.

Most students had Twitter accounts prior to the transmedia learning experience, as they were "forced" (sic) to create them as part of earlier units. However, most student accounts were largely dormant. Participants indicated that their use of Twitter changed dramatically during the course of the semester in terms of understanding of the platform, following of relevant content and active participation. However, given that the focus of this study is on communication students, the overall level of active Twitter engagement was nevertheless surprisingly low. Despite widespread assumptions regarding millennials' social media skills and ability to multitask, participants felt overwhelmed by the multitude of platforms offered to them; not necessarily within the learning or unit specific context, but in more general terms. In the words of one participant: "I don't understand how people can keep their posts updated every day and stuff […] I don't have that many thoughts". Time implications were mentioned in particular as a major restriction to exploring and embracing new platforms: "It takes over your life trying to keep up to date with everything". And

> I already use social media too much in my opinion, and so to add a whole other platform [.....] the thought is exhausting. I can't be bothered keeping it up. I already neglect what I have now, so I'm like "why create something and create a presence when I know that I won't be able to maintain that?" So at the moment no, but maybe into the future. Yeah, I'll definitely start to use different platforms when I have more time on my hands.

Consequently, there are apparent benefits in engaging learners where they already are, as opposed to expecting them to go out of their way to seek out learning material via traditional communication means, such as email, or learning platforms, like Moodle and Blackboard. As one participant explains

> Sorry to admit this, but [our instructor] would send off snaps and I would screenshot the snaps and those snaps had what we had to do and things like that. If she hadn't used the snaps, I would never have even looked at the noticeboard. I wouldn't have gone to the unit material to look at what she was posting. Legitimately there's no other reason I would know about it if it weren't for Snapchat. I just wouldn't have bothered.

And in the words of others

> Unless [our instructor] posted an announcement, like "check out this new blog post" [I wouldn't have seen the information] I was like, oh yeah click on the link […] Maybe I am just lazy with social media. I don't like being on the computer for very long

> I think because you've got to sign into an account: there's click this, click that…Whereas you've got Facebook and all that where you just click the one app and go straight into it. It sounds super lazy but…

Hence, as illustrated in the quotes above, Snapchat in particular appealed to students, as the regular messages alerted learners to relevant content in real time, via their preferred device (usually mobile phone), which they were already referring to on a regular basis. This convenient accessibility enabled deeper engagement via the posting of questions related to upcoming classes and links to additional resources, which students admitted "made them think" outside and beyond the classroom.

An additional benefit of the transmedia approach is the fostering of creativity. Multiple participants perceived 'creativity' missing in other business degree units, which were referred to as "largely academic", despite deeply embedded work integrated learning opportunities and in particular the use of real life clients throughout the curriculum. Multiple respondents voiced that the transmedia approach to learning had "helped me become more creative".

Discussion

A best practice transmedia teaching model
A key aim of this project is to investigate best practice in teaching social media and transmedia within the public relations discipline and within a transmedia teaching environment. A key finding was that students expect teaching staff to communicate with them 'where they already are'. This is a learning for educators: be attuned to different cohorts of

students and ascertain what platforms they are using prior to developing a transmedia strategy for a unit. The focus groups confirmed Clark, Couldy, MacDonald and Stephansen's (2015) findings that only some students will embrace additional learning opportunities. Other students – including some high performing students – strategically avoid any non-compulsory elements due to time limitations. These limitations are automatically reflected in the study design, i.e. participation in focus groups and interviews signifies an additional, non-graded commitment, which influenced the representativeness of our sample.

The nature of the activities and the 'live' environment was not lost on the students with some commenting on the nature of the transmedia focus: "The real life factor makes [the learning experience] more meaningful". In addition, there was overwhelming support for face to face learning opportunities within a transmedia environment and in particular a public relations context, ensuring exposure to other 'values', 'perspectives' and 'viewpoints'. Students acknowledged working increasingly in 'silos' and familiar environments, hence they noticed they had to be actively forced to leave their 'comfort zone'. They also acknowledged the particular relevance of this within the public relations context, understanding that as graduates they will have to communicate with stakeholders from a wide range of backgrounds, with different preference sand communication styles.

Finally, from an instructor perspective, the Snapchat platform enabled meaningful engagement with offshore students throughout the semester, who were amongst the most prolific users.

Exposure and 'listening' are key

A transmedia approach enables students to be in charge of their own learning journey. They can decide how much they want to engage, no matter if simply to ensure a pass or to venture well beyond the assessment requirements by exploring a topic area further. This links to the creation of a collaborative learning community in which the instructor is no longer the centre point or even 'expert', but rather a facilitator and motivator. Students' exposure to different platforms encourages learners to venture beyond their comfort zone, even if this venturing simply consists of setting up an account to watch and listen to what is going on. Exposure to communication tools is arguably crucial within this context, given that future employers likely expect graduates to be familiar with these tools to some extent. However, it also motivates students to reflect on their own behaviour and become more aware of their digital footprint. Overall, students become more strategic in their thinking in terms of different platforms, approaches and appropriateness.

Given the focus on exposure and active engagement, the authors argue that the benefits of 'lurking' should not be underestimated. Whilst there may be no *visible* engagement from some students, this does not actually mean they are not following or *listening* to updates.
For example, some students liked the idea of the blog despite admitting they never actively contributed or commented on other students' posts. As one participant explains

> I'm definitely a passive consumer in social media, I read stuff, I like pages that I'm
> interested in, that's where I can get all my information in one place and I can just
> do my reading.

Learning beyond the classroom: resource considerations

While a transmedia approach to teaching allows educators to provide multiple entry points for students to access the learning material, enabling individualised learning paths based on

personal preferences and styles (e.g. visual or auditory), learners in this study still value face to face interaction. A transmedia approach provides students with platforms to expand their learning beyond assessment requirements and learning objectives (if desired) and to collaborate with their peers beyond the narrow confines of traditional working groups. The opportunity to learn beyond the classroom was noted by students.

> I think it will actually push it beyond just the class work as well, because I could be sitting on my couch on the weekend and something could happen and I think "yeah that would be a really cool topic to talk about with my transmedia storytelling friends" and then tweet the group and just start this huge discussion, which could then lead to a class discussion, and it would just expand that much more.

Students also appreciated the creation of a collaborative community of learners, sharing insights and tips that were not led by the instructors. Engaged students appreciate not being in silos or set working groups. Exposure to a wider community of learners enables them to ask for advice, as well provides access to additional resources and learning material. Not all students used these, but they were available for those who wanted deeper immersion or were otherwise reluctant to engage in a face to face setting. As one participant explained: "I probably wouldn't communicate as much with other people within the classroom."

Conclusion

This study provides further insight into new platforms that can enhance blended learning and student engagement and thereby adds to a growing body of knowledge of how to integrate new technologies into teaching. Findings support other study's (e.g. Flanigan & Babchuk, 2015) conclusions that 'digital natives' do not know as much about technology as it might be commonly assumed. Whilst students may be familiar with many of the social media platforms available to them, they often do not understand how the technology works, nor how to use it within a professional context. Furthermore, they admit to frequently feeling overwhelmed by the sheer volume of communication channels and wealth of information within each of these. Within the communication context, it is critical students understand technologies and communication platforms beyond personal use. However, findings from this study are equally relevant across many other disciplines, where a transmedia approach to teaching may be appropriate to foster deeper engagement. Furthermore, many businesses now expect graduates to have a high level of social media literacy and working knowledge of the most common digital platforms.

Findings indicate that higher education staff need to dedicate more time to expose learners to (emerging) digital technologies; not only as a means of increasing engagement with students, but also to increase overall digital literacy skills. Hence, continuous professional development is required not only for students, but also for staff, as platforms, technologies, tools and best practice understanding evolves. Key findings of this study highlight that educators need to transit from a push to a pull model, by communicating with students 'where they already are', i.e. via those platforms that are preferred, frequently used and require limited logins or seeking out of information, to ensure learners maximise opportunities to engage more deeply and explore additional learning material. Teaching in a transmedia mode does imply a certain level of risk and vulnerability on the side of the instructor, as control is relinquished over to where students source information and how they choose to interact with it in a public forum. Rather than to teach in a traditional sense, the instructor's role is to guide, expose, inspire,

challenge and encourage students to question, as knowledge is continuously co-created within the learning community.

This research is timely for communication and education professionals who are in the midst of a social media evolution to mentor and teach university students the skills they will need upon graduation for industry readiness.

Further research

As a longitudinal, cross-institutional action research project, future focus groups, interviews and observation will add to the findings outlined in this paper. Additional platforms are being used as a result of student feedback, for example Facebook and Instagram, and these will add to research findings. The notion of the 'lurker' has emerged as part of these early stages and will be examined in more detail in the near future, in particular from the perspective of 'lurking as a learning style', thereby critically challenging the assumption that lack of active engagement equals limited learning outcomes.

Acknowledgements

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