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7 Public Engagement as Collateral Damage

This chapter will focus on the third of Boyer's scholarly practices, which he terms 'application'. This comprises a number of different practices, including sitting on committees, inputting to policy, advising charities and so on. The major practice I will address in this chapter though is that of public engagement.

Public engagement

This is defined by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) in the following way (HEFCE 2007):

'Public engagement' involves specialists in higher education listening to, developing their understanding of, and interacting with non-specialists. The 'public' includes individuals and groups who do not currently have a formal relationship with an HEI through teaching, research or knowledge transfer.

Hart, Northmore and Gerhardt (2009) summarise seven dimensions of engagement:

- 1 public access to facilities
- 2 public access to knowledge
- 3 student engagement
- 4 faculty engagement
- 5 widening participation
- 6 encouraging economic regeneration and enterprise in social engagement
- 7 institutional relationship and partnership building

It can therefore be realised in a number of ways, from student volunteering to opening university libraries to the public, to authoring a general interest book. Perhaps the most visible and commonly cited example though is that of broadcasting, where an academic is used to present a television or radio programme or used as an expert in discussion programmes. The Hart *et al.*'s report lists some excellent case studies, but these are often bespoke and

expensive projects within universities as they seek to promote their reputation and establish links with communities. In this section I want to look at how open, digital, networked approaches to scholarly practice can provide a different perspective on public engagement.

The first step in this is to consider the production of digital outputs. In terms of traffic to sites, the user-generated content sites have impressive statistics: more than 100 million monthly for YouTube, 4.3 million for Scribd and 1.75 million for Slideshare (figures from <http://www.compete.com> for July 2010). These dwarf the statistics for most higher education projects; for instance the most well-established OER site, MIT's OpenCourseWare site (<http://ocw.mit.edu>), has 200,000 visitors monthly, the OU's OpenLearn 21,000 and the learning object repository MERLOT 17,000. Perhaps the best site for education-related material is the TED talks (available at <http://www.ted.com>) with 1.5 million monthly visitors, and through third-party platforms such as iTunes U, where the Open University iTunes project registers around 1.6 million downloads a month (<http://projects.kmi.open.ac.uk/itunesu/impact/>).

What these figures indicate is that there is potentially a significant impact to be realised in the use of Web 2.0-type output. Commercial, third-party providers have the most traffic, but here educational content is mixed in with a wide range of materials, which increases the likelihood of serendipitous encounters with university content but dilutes the overall institutional presence.

We know then that the potential audience is significant through such avenues; the next issue is the comparison with the effort required to reach that audience. Traditional broadcast requires a large team effort usually, whereas digital, networked and open approaches require relatively little effort and associated cost.

I'll use an example of my own experience to illustrate the point. In March 2010 two of my network contacts (George Siemens and Dave Cormier) announced that they were running a short, free, online course about the future of the course and asked for contributions. One evening, I created a Slidecast with accompanying music for them to use (<http://www.slideshare.net/mweller/future-of-education-3475415>). The production of this short presentation required approximately two hours worth of input, using images from Flickr with a Creative Commons licence. It didn't 'cost' anything apart from the time investment, and the technical expertise required was minimal. Perhaps more significant was a familiarity with creating these types of presentations and feeling comfortable with sharing content.

The Slidecast generated about 4,500 views over the coming months. These figures do not compare with the type of audience that might be reached through a television or radio programme, but the cost and effort required was also considerably less. And I was not the only person to contribute a free object to their course (see

<http://edfutures.com/contributions>). The reason that a global network of experts could contribute artefacts to a course for free is because of the low threshold to content production. The reasons *why* people did it are more complex, but include the following:

- A social connection with the course organisers – whether they have met face to face or not, the contributors had a connection with the organisers, so felt well disposed towards their request.
- Interest in the subject – creating the object gave each of the contributors an opportunity to explore ideas that were of interest to them also.
- Creativity and fun – unconstrained by the conventional requirements of scholarly outputs it allowed the contributors to play with format and ideas.
- To engage with the community – sharing content is seen as a default action for many of the contributors.
- Ego – we should not underestimate the selfish, more egotistical reasons for generating content, including positive feedback and reinforcement of status.

A long-tail content production system

The overall reach of any one such artefact may not compare with that of traditional broadcast outputs, but collectively we may see similar levels of impact. This is a good example of Anderson's long tail (2006). Traditional broadcasting can be seen as embodying the classic Pareto principle, which suggests that 20 per cent of your products account for 80 per cent of sales or views. These are the blockbusters. But as Brynjolfsson, Hu and Simester (2007) demonstrate when products move online the concentration of sales becomes more distributed. They compared a shopping catalogue with the online version of the same products and found that 'the Internet channel exhibits a significantly less concentrated sales distribution when compared with the catalog channel, even though these two channels offer the same products at the same set of prices'. Being online encourages a more 'long tail' oriented set of behaviours. They further argue that as 'search costs' reduce, sales concentration becomes more skewed towards niche products. Search costs in this sense refer to the effort required by the individual, so the more experienced they become at searching, the more these costs decrease. This suggests that long-tail-type behaviour will continue to increase as people become more experienced at searching, evaluating and locating content that appeals to them.

If we consider the types of outputs generated in higher education, then it is possible to re-conceptualise universities as 'long-tail content production environments'. In Table 7.1 the range of content that universities can produce is listed, matched with

Table 7.1 University content matched to open, distributed channels

Output	Type of outlet	Example
Data	Data repositories	RealClimate, Gene Expression Omnibus
Research paper	Open access journals, repositories, individual websites	Mendeley, Google Scholar, Open Research Online (ORO)
Software code	Open source repositories	Sourceforge
Lectures/teaching content	OER projects, learning repositories, commercial sites	iTunes U, YouTube edu, MIT OpenCourseWare, Slideshare
Ideas, proposals	Individual sites	Blogs, Twitter, YouTube
Conferences, seminars	Conference sites	TED talks, YouTube, Twitter hashtag, Cloudworks
Debate, discussion	Public engagement sites, subject community forums	Blogs, Twitter, discussion boards

some of the examples of the open, digital network outlets that might be used to disseminate them.

Table 7.1 includes some examples which may not, at first glance, seem like outputs, such as ideas and discussion. However, when an individual shares, or conducts, these via digital networked means, they become a shareable artefact. In open source communities, the discussion forums are viewed as a valuable learning resource (Glott, Meiszner and Sowe 2007). Ideas and proposals, or suggestions, can be seen as a further example of the change in granularity in output. For example, my colleague Tony Hirst recounts how he suggested on Twitter that someone should take the Digital Britain report (a UK government proposal to develop the digital economy), break it into chunks and make it commentable. A response from Joss Winn led to them forming the company WriteToReply which does exactly this with consultation documents (Hirst 2009).

Potentially then higher education produces, as part of its everyday function, a large amount of long-tail content. All of the outputs listed above are unlikely to

attract large audiences, but all of them are capable of gathering niche audiences, which collectively would fulfil a large element of a university's public engagement function.

This can be realised through specific projects, such as the OER projects many universities are initiating. However, long-tail models only work when there is sufficient content to occupy the tail. In order to achieve this scale of content in a sustainable manner, the outputs listed above need to become a frictionless by-product of the standard practice, rather than the outcomes of isolated projects.

To return to the three key characteristics of this book, what is required then to realise this frictionless generation of content is to embed the practices of generating digital, networked, open outputs. While many of the outputs in Table 7.1 are already in a digital format (e.g. code and data), there is still a cultural and institutional change required in order to make these outputs open and networked. The open aspect can be addressed in one of two ways: the first is to have an institutional policy on open access, and the second is to encourage staff to adopt the kinds of sharing practice outlined in Chapter 1.

Some universities have developed policies around open access of teaching and research content. Wiley (2009a) states that 'as of July 2009, forty one organizations in the United States have open access mandates: seventeen at the institutional level, ten at the departmental level, four at the college level, and six at the funder level'. These policies are categorised as dealing with four main issues relating to open access:

access (i.e., access to scholarly works by faculty, students, and administrators), cost (i.e., the price of continuing to subscribe to increasingly expensive journals), copyright (i.e., the common practice where faculty members relinquish their rights to the written work), and tenure (i.e., the manner in which current tenure review procedures consider open access publications). (Wiley 2009a)

The biggest shift though is likely to occur when we consider the outputs which are not necessarily digital in nature and make the shift to realising these in digital, shareable formats. This is only achievable through such practices becoming second nature for academics.

Two common objections to producing these types of output are money and time. In both cases I would argue that we underestimate the time and money we spend in many current wasteful activities, which we do not question because they are standard practice in the workplace. For example, meetings can be notoriously expensive, and often unproductive, if one takes into account all of the salaries involved, yet are perceived as a necessary evil in the modern university. As with

lectures, though they are often disparaged, meetings *can* be useful and the best way to achieve certain goals, but as with lectures, they are also often uninspiring and ineffective. Holding virtual meetings is one approach (these can at least be recorded and shared if useful), but other means of achieving the same ends might be to share blog posts, brainstorm ideas in shared documents and so on.

Similarly keeping blogs is often seen as an additional activity, but it can be seen as a by-product of academic activity, such as keeping notes, working up ideas and so on. Clay Shirky (2008a) talking of cognitive surplus, recounts how a TV producer responded when he told her about Wikipedia:

She heard this story and she shook her head and said, 'Where do people find the time?' That was her question. And I just kind of snapped. And I said, 'No one who works in TV gets to ask that question. You know where the time comes from. It comes from the cognitive surplus you've been masking for 50 years'.

The same might be true of generating outputs. The analogue methods of working may well be hiding the sort of cognitive surplus Shirky refers to. They don't necessarily take extra time, but we have spent much of that time creating non-shareable resources. A small but indicative example is that when I used to attend conferences I was required to write a report on the conference which would go to the funding committee in my department but which would not be read by anyone else. Now I write a blog post, or create a Slidecast or make a YouTube video which is accessible to everyone. The shift is to producing an output which is shareable.

Frictionless broadcasting

The advantages of a move towards a frictionless long-tail model are largely related to costs and resources. Because its cost is free or relatively low, it means that, unlike large-scale projects or traditional broadcasting, there is no need to consider audience demographics, to establish specific projects (with the associated management costs) or to set objectives and goals. The result of this means that, taken as a whole, the university can embrace the kind of unpredictability that is at the heart of the Internet, what Jonathan Zittrain (2008) refers to as 'generativity'. Unpredictability is an undesirable goal for any specific project to have as an aim because budget allocation entails project objectives, measures of success, intended audiences and lines of responsibility. This is one of the areas of tension for universities (and other large organisations) with the Internet culture – the project-focused method of working ingrained in many organisations is at odds with the bottom-up, unpredictable nature of internet innovation. There are two ways to

address this; the first is to invest considerable amounts of money creating content which might take off and the second is to generate content at low cost as a by-product of normal operations.

A small, non-educational, example of this is that of the Downfall meme. These videos take the same segment of the (excellent) 2004 German film *Downfall*, when Hitler in his bunker rants against his imminent defeat. By overlaying different subtitles the first parody depicted his rage against being banned from Xbox Live. The ease with which it could be altered and the inherent comedy in seeing a despot savagely bemoan the unfairness of obscure topics led to it going viral. It generated thousands of reinterpretations and millions of hits, until the production company ordered a takedown notice of all parodies in 2010. In this it exemplifies the unpredictability that can occur online and the creativity which can be unleashed.

Memes such as Downfall (and others such as 'David After the Dentist') are a rarity, however. It is not that large numbers of views or remixes are possible that is significant, but that unpredicted use and adoption can occur. Very small viewing figures are the norm in the long tail.

If we consider public engagement from the perspective of the individual academic, then we can think of a continuum of possibilities. At one end would be relatively small-scale events such as a public lecture. This has a small, limited audience, but the filter is relatively open, in that many academics can at some point have an opportunity to deliver such a lecture. It is relatively low cost, with the venue often being provided free (as part of the university) and some refreshments. In the middle of our continuum we might place a general interest book. This will reach a larger audience, cost more to produce and have a stricter filter in place, in that publishers will determine who writes such a book. And at the opposite end of the continuum we can place broadcast activity, which is high cost, reaches a large audience and has a very fine filter with only a very small number of academics becoming broadcasters. The level of compromise or generalisation can also be seen to increase across this continuum, where with a public lecture the academic may speak in detailed terms about their subject, but with a general interest programme they are often required to 'dumb down' to an extent.

If we now consider the sort of digital outputs listed above, they have some similarity with these but also some areas of difference. They can be classified as follows:

- Low cost to free – if we assume they are by-products of activity which is already costed.
- Small but unpredictable audience – the long tail typically has small audiences but unexpected hits can occur.

- Open filter – anyone can publish.
- No compromise – with no associated cost the academic can be as general or detailed as they like.
- High reuse potential – the reuse potential of most other forms is low, either because they are in a format that is not reusable or copyright prohibits it, whereas small online artefacts can be easily aggregated into different contexts.
- Different distribution – such outputs are often distributed through search and social networks, so having a pre-established network is an important factor in seeding their uptake.

In order to encourage this frictionless type of output, universities can engage in several parallel functions. The first is staff development, although it is essential to promote a sense of independence, since most of the tools are very easy to use. Nevertheless what is often useful is a space, or allowance, that legitimises exploration with these tools, overcomes some initial concerns and establishes a peer support network. In the podstars project I ran at the Open University (Weller 2010), which encouraged academics to start generating video outputs, these were the most common positive elements of the project. For example, this participant commented, ‘It gave me confidence to get on and try it. I am already using it in my research and indirectly I am using it for teaching, via communications to large cohorts of students on the science website’.

The emphasis on any staff development then should be on empowerment and liberation, rather than on training in specific software packages. The type of staff development required is probably located somewhere in between Google’s 20 per cent time, which developers can use to work on interesting projects, and the standard IT training courses, in that it needs some direction and technical support but is best served by allowing a diverse range of projects and encouraging creativity.

A second function for universities to perform is to remove obstacles, or perceived obstacles, to the production of such outputs. This will be most apparent in promotion criteria, which almost exclusively focus on traditional outputs such as journal articles. We will look at rewards and recognition later in Chapter 11.

Related to the formal recognition of such outputs in promotion cases is the informal acceptance within an institution. The benefits of an open, digital, networked approach to research, public engagement and teaching need to be recognised by both senior management and colleagues and not dismissed as merely ‘playing’.

Lastly, although third-party sites such as YouTube are often the best tools at delivering such content, the provision of educational and institutional context is

important, as it provides both recognition and increases the profile of the individual and institution. This might be in the form of a YouTube channel, an iPhone app, a university portal, a departmental blog, a newsletter and so on.

It is through these approaches that the cultivating environment which will encourage the bottom-up production of varied content will emerge. Given the potential benefits in profile, engagement and costs, these are relatively small changes to introduce.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that we can view higher education as a long-tail content production environment. Much of what we currently aim to achieve through specific public engagement projects can be realised by producing digital artefacts as a by-product of typical scholarly activity. My intention is not to suggest that this is the *only* means of performing public engagement; for example, engaging with local schools works well by providing face-to-face contact with inspiring figures. As with other scholarly functions, some will remain, but the digital alternative not only allows for new ways of realising the same goals but also opens up new possibilities.

I used the example of Dave Cormier and George Siemens' course in this chapter, and the advent of easy to produce content, which is shareable via a global network, means that this type of course is now possible to organise and construct (relatively) easily and offer freely. We are only at the start of exploring the possibilities this affords us, and in Chapter 8 we will look at this teaching function in more detail.