# SOCIAL NETWORKING AND AUTHENTIC ENGAGEMENT: STUDENTS AS "PRODUSERS"

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## ABSTRACT

Ambivalence seems to typify the attitude of many academics towards the use of read/write technologies (also known as Web 2.0): they might work, but then they might not. And there would be new skills to master, so passing by on the other side is often the action of choice. This research study turns that approach upside down. It is a part of a larger undertaking, *Using Ambient Social Media: free-to use software as viable VLEs in syllabus design and assessment*, a Learning & Teaching Innovation Project funded by the University. Even though the original title of the research used the term VLE, it seems now that PLE might be a better term, as "VLE" implies institutional learning environments. while "PLE" suggests a more informal produsage environment. Two cohorts of students of digital photography were privileged to participate in one lecturer's pursuit of excellence, as "produsers" (Bruns, 2007) in the lulu.com environment.

The overarching focus of this presentation is the transformational experience of the students as they engage in an online professional self-publishing environment. Bruns coined the term "produsage" to reflect the output of a producer-cum-user, particularly in the process of user-led content creation. These students were produsers of photobooks and photomagazines, using the affordances of lulu.com – an environment that constitutes a technosocial framework (Bruns, 2008c) within which to operate.

This iteration of produsage is characterised by complexity; it is a blend of innovation, risk, entrepreneurship and professionalism with (in this instance, anyway) just a dash of intrigue. Several factors serendipitously create this opportunity: firstly, there is the proliferation of read/write technologies, begging academic exploration. The successful Innovation Project bid also influences the potential in terms of both resources and focus. Then the opportune discovery of e-tivities (Salmon, 2002) provides a framework within which to design learning interventions. and, lastly, the support available from the University's Learning & Teaching Enhancement Unit, together with the articulation between this study and the Institutional Pathfinder project.

The underpinning pedagogic logic of the account is one of distributed learning. This is an approach that forges a link between the traditional in media art education and the innovative; between knowledge creation across 'distributed' locations such media labs, studios and workshops and knowledge creation using new software and virtual learning environments (Logan, Allen, Kurien & Flint, 2007). It aptly addresses the potential for learning in the produsage model.

In a quirk of course design, it might also be said that produsage is the guiding principle for the engagement of students in articulating the assessment criteria; transferring these criteria to a rubric; and evaluating artefacts-in-production and providing peer feedback to each other.

## INTRODUCTION

This paper describes the way in which one lecturer engaged her students in a learning experience that we believe fits the profile of produsage (Bruns, 2006). In the context of a higher education digital photography degree, using the ubiquitous read/write technologies, and mapped onto the characteristics of produsage, distributed learning is offered as the theoretical framework for the teaching and learning activity. These characteristics then frame the case for produsage in lulu.com – the print-on-demand social networking site and the virtual learning environment that the students used in their learning journey.

## CONTEXT

In December 2006, a team drawn from the Arts, Media and English Department (AME) of London South Bank University's (LSBU) Faculty of Arts and Human Sciences successfully bid for funding through the University's Learning & Teaching Project Innovation Scheme. The team said:

> "In our view social media will play a great part in future patterns of professional and educational communication. Through our 'lead-edge' media programme we have an opportunity to both study students' current use and design forms of assessment which 'mesh' with social media and hence provide an important model for HE in general."

A year later, the team was awarded a second tranche of funding from the Innovation Project Scheme to "build on the knowledge base gained with the research project: *Using Ambient Social Media: free-to use software as viable VLEs in syllabus design and assessment* … and [to] further the research with a renewed focus and methodological approach." The second project was called *"From coursework to social network: exploring social network sites as art and media learning environments"*. This paper focuses on the aspect of students as produsers (Bruns, 2008c) in a read/write environment during the first round of funding.

Self-publishing initiatives that rely on the availability of free social software have exploded onto the radar of, amongst others, higher education (HE) institutions. Using these print-on-demand (POD) platforms, authors are able to manage the production and distribution of their work on an unprecedented scale. This paper seeks to explore the relevance of the POD phenomenon in HE by addressing the following research question: "Do digital photography students engaging with print-on-demand social networking technology act as authentic produsers?"

In the first semester of the 2007-08 academic year, two units entitled "Photographic Cultures" (at level two) and Brief-Led Project (at level three)– were embedded in lulu.com, an online POD platform. This piece of research explored the use of a single site as a creative produsage environment as well as the vehicle for demonstrating the accomplishment of learning outcomes. A second facet of the research was the engagement of students in the development of the criteria that were used to ascertain the achievement of outcomes and in the application of those criteria in grading their peers' work.

## THE READ/WRITE WEB IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The big picture of this presentation is the transformative understanding (Land, 2007) gained by the students as they engage in an online publishing environment. The case for the use of the read/write web (Richardson, 2006) in higher education has been ably stated, a position acknowledged in the Innovation Project that forms the backdrop for this study. While Weller (2008) emphasises that the read/write approach takes into account both technological and social facets, there is also the need to explore the emerging use of technology in the light of intellectual property issues (Dautlich & Eziefula, 2007). We recommend Anderson's article (2007) for anyone wishing to investigate the potential in greater depth. The paper traces the emergence of the phenomenon now known as Web 2.0 or, as we prefer, read/write technologies and their application in the higher education environment; it also offers a comprehensive bibliography for further reading.

In our experience, many academics are aware of the read/write web, of its current use, and even of the potential that it embodies to improve the student learning experience. It seems to us that it is the perception of a need to master new skills and, possibly, pedagogies that it the greatest barrier to their implementation. This study is evidence of how engagement as produsers provided students with the opportunity to engage in an environment relevant to their field of study. These digital photography students benefited from being produsers (Bruns, 2007) in the lulu.com environment.

## WHAT IS A PRODUSER?

Bruns (2008a) defines a produser as someone who engages in "**user**-led content **prod**uction (**produsage**)". While he tends to link the concept with the read/write web, Bruns does not confine produsage to this technological genre. Figure 1 (Bruns, 2008b) depicts the produsage process:

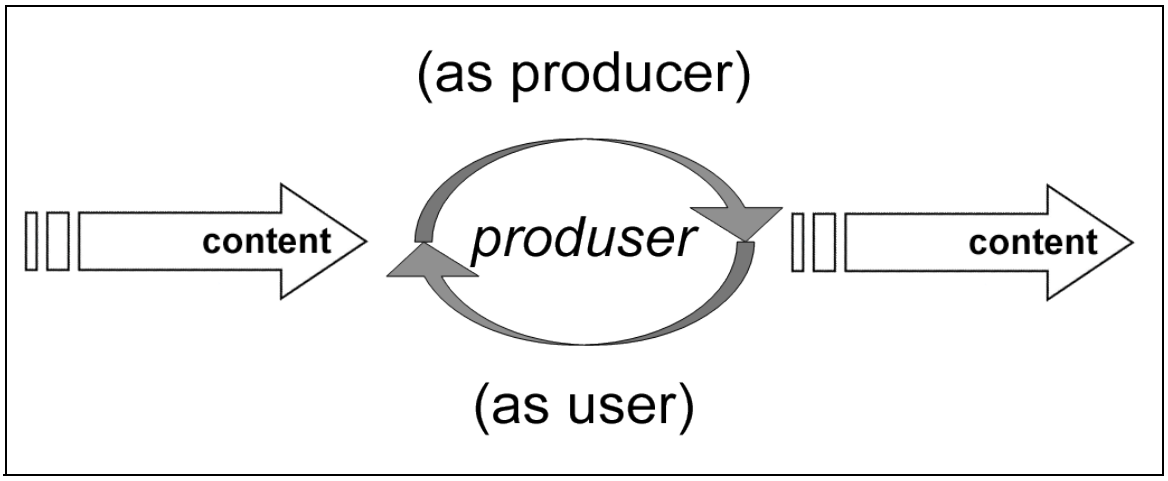


Figure 1: The produser
(Image first published in *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life, and Beyond: From Production to Produsage* by Axel Bruns (New York: Peter Lang, 2008). © Axel Bruns. Used with permission.)

Reflecting on the definition, it becomes clear that there is a continuum of produsage, from implicit to explicit. One implicit form of the activity must be

plain to anyone who has an online account with, say, Amazon (Bruns, 2007). Surfing the website while logged in, and buying particular items, triggers the underlying engine to generate suggestions of products that might be of interest to the user – both at the current time and during future visits to the site. By using the site, the individual **produses** a personalised (in this instance) view. We might call this many-to-one produsage, as it is the buying patterns of many that create the view presented to one. This form of produsage is clearly mediated by technology.

Another, less obvious, example of implicit many-to-one produsage is to be found in the PageRank algorithm at work in Google (Brin & Page, 1998). Simply put, pages are ranked by the search engine according to how many other pages cite it (or are "backlinked" to it). So the keywords upon which a user conducts a search generate results that are dependent on the input of many.

At the other (explicit) end of the scale, Wikipedia is an output of produsage, as are flickr and YouTube. In terms of the definition, it might be said that some kinds of group work also fulfil the conditions of produsage. In this study, for instance, there is a clear case for many-to-many produsage in the way that the students worked as a group to define and refine the assessment criteria; transferred these to a rubric; evaluating artefacts-in-production; and provided peer feedback to one another.

At the heart of the concept, however, is a user who engages with content to produse an output. While the social nature of the read/write environment is more or less implicit in the produsage context, it is the change in focus from the industrial production model to a service orientation that hallmarks the concept. Bruns (2006) identifies four key characteristics of produsage:

- users produse new content which is made available to others;
- in the creative process, they collaborate with other produsers;
- products are always subject to revision; and
- this "revisioning" process necessitates new traditions of copyrighting.

In this paper, we aim to demonstrate how these characteristics were evidenced in the study; how the students produsedphotobooks and photomagazines, using the affordances of lulu.com – an environment that constitutes as technosocial framework (Bruns, 2008c) within which to operate.

## PEDAGOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Distributed learning is an often neglected theoretical framework within which to explore the complex nature of media art education. This approach forges a link between the traditional styles of teaching and learning in the field and the innovative. It also accommodates the shift from students' creating knowledge in such 'distributed' locations as media labs, studios and workshops, on the one hand, and the way that they use new software and virtual learning environments (Logan *et al*, 2007) to address academic requirements and creative enterprise, on the other. It encapsulates the environment conducive to learning implicit in the produsage model.

Salmon's e-tivity model (2002) offered a design for learning interventions. The learning and teaching activity in each unit was carefully designed in such a way that the face-to-face activities of the students each week in class alternated with

online e-tivities that provided a link between the topic of the earlier face-to-face session, and that of the next one. For instance, in week two, the students spent part of their class time in the University's library researching the photobook collection.

An outcome of that research was to identify a particular volume that they wished to explore further. The e-tivity for the week that followed required that they continued their research in the online environment, looking for such information about their chosen photobook as the "ISBN, publisher's site and critical reviews". Using lulu.com's blogging tool, they posted the information they had discovered for peer comment. The knowledge, understanding and skills acquired in this activity fed into the next week's face-to-face class.

A particular focus in the design of these units (with particular reference to the second that we believe articulates well with the produsage model) was the way that students engaged with the assessment process in a particularly meaningful way. We believe that the pedagogical framework is an appropriate place to explain this process, as it builds on the "*syllabus design and assessment"* of the earlier funding, and engages students with pedagogical processes.

In this round of the research, the teacher and students engaged in a carefully orchestrated activity to design assessment criteria that addressed the learning outcomes of the individual units. *Rubric Studio,* freely available at facultycentral.com, was used to design "irubrics", marking grids that captured the assessment criteria, as well as negotiated descriptions of levels of achievement. These rubrics were used collaboratively for marking by both students (for peer assessment) and lecturers (for tutor assessment).

Early in the course of the unit, and once the students had engaged with photobooks in both the physical and online environments, the students and lecturer engaged in the process of developing criteria for assessing work. (It should be noted that in the University's validation procedures, learning outcomes are stated, as are assessment methods. Assessment criteria, however, are at the discretion of the lecturer. This situation created the opportunity to engage the students in the process.)

After introducing learners to rubrics in class, they were asked to consider the learning outcomes and develop assessment criteria in response to such questions as: "What qualities would you look for in deciding how to mark a photobook?" With a list of questions, the class broke into self-selected small groups with the following tasks:

- identify 6 assessment criteria that measure the learning outcomes
- rank the criteria selected in order of importance, from most important to least important
- present the top two criteria to the class.

As each group presented their top criteria, they were listed on the whiteboard and the class then decided which four criteria of those identified were the most relevant to the outcomes of the project. The class then decided descriptors of 'poor,' 'fair,' 'good' and 'excellent' performance for each criterion. The collaboratively decided criteria were listed down the left side of the rubric matrix

and the descriptors were entered under the scores 0-5 which formed the column headings. In this process, the produsage principle can be clearly traced.

This is an unashamedly criterion-referenced approach to assessment. Biggs (1999) states that there is "no *educational* justification for grading on a curve" (emphasis in original) and we would agree. It is also a student-centred approach. And this is where we find the touch of intrigue: the excellent results of the students were considered by the system to be out of line with the norm. We believe that there is a case for future research into the lip service paid to criterion referenced assessment in an HE environment that clearly still believes in grading on a curve.

**THE CASE FOR PRODUSAGE IN LULU.COM**

The use of lulu.com as a virtual environment within which to teach these two cohorts of students was essentially a natural progression from earlier work in this area. We earlier noted Bruns' four key characteristics of produsage (2006):

- users produse new content which is made available to others;
- in the creative process, they collaborate with other produsers;
- products are always subject to revision; and
- this "revisioning" process necessitates new traditions of copyrighting.

We will briefly explore each of these attributes in the light of the lulu.com experience. Figure 2 depicts the way that we see the produsage principle at work in these students' activity.

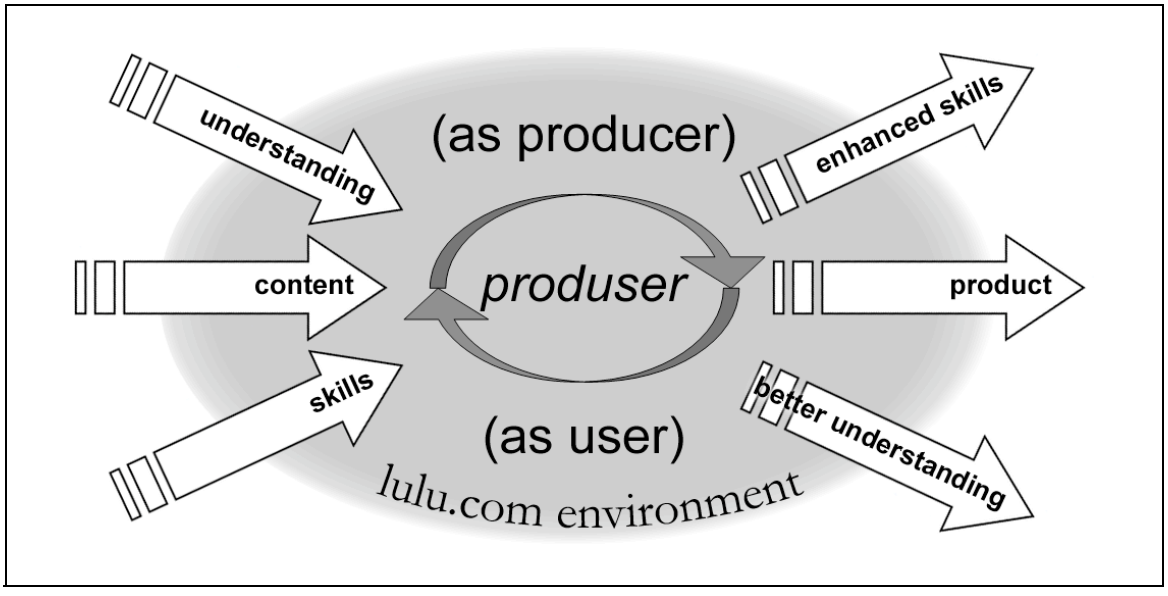


Figure 2: The produser in the lulu.com environment. Adapted from *The produser* (Figure 1 above.)

**Produsing new content**

In the course of their activity in the digital photography unit, students used existing content (in this case it was digital material that they had produced during a previous unit) which they transformed into photobooks and photomagazines. These in turn are available online in a POD environment, and may well also feed into a future iteration of produsage.

We would contend that, in addition to engaging with content, the students brought skills and understanding to the produsage environment that were refined and reinvented in the process. Their feedback on the units reflects a clear perception of the innovative nature of the enterprise: *"Personally I believe anything that challenges the norm and gets you thinking in different ways is a good thing. This module is not presented to us in a traditional, stuffy, listen and takes notes old school university style. We are studying a new art form and our lecture methods should reflect the move away from tradition."*

Another student recognised the active nature of the engagement in lulu.com as a benefit: *"It is easier in my opinion to learn digital media practices on the Internet as opposed to the classroom or lecture hall - personally I am a more practical individual and feel the need to actively do something to learn effectively"*.

**Collaboration with other users**

The engagement of students with each others' work during the course of the unit is recognised by them as a part of the learning curve: *"There was a lot of help being given through blogs, forums and in person between all classmates during this period. Considering so many seemed unfamiliar with Indesign only a few weeks ago we all managed to create and upload an interesting mix of books into the Lulu store."* The community spirit that was fostered in the process was also perceived as valuable: *"Learning by way of a community has been great for this unit, though I have not myself benefited from being part of a community it has clearly been a help to some members of the class who find websites and concepts such as those we have been studying more difficult than the theoretical issues in photography."*

**Products subject to revision**

While the students did not explicitly recognise the potential for revision of their work, it is clear that the very tasks they were set – to recreate their own existing digital material in a new format that is only published on demand – opens the door to refining and revising what has been produced. There was some sense of the messiness of the process, however: *"Learning about digital media in an online environment as opposed to a more traditional format (i.e. a classroom) has been slightly chaotic at times."*

**New traditions of copyrighting**

The students were clearly still engaging with a traditionalist view of intellectual property: *"Another issue that was voiced by a large amount of our group was the fact that, while publishing as students, we do not control the simple intellectual copyright to our work."* They even had concerns about the possibility of the *"University who could, in theory (i hope not practice), profit from our work and charge us royalties for what is essentially our own personal art."*

The underlying conversation reflects that in HE in this country: ownership and possible plagiarism. There is a clear case for engaging the students, and possibly the HE community more generally, in a conversation around the changing nature of intellectual property and ways to address the emerging traditions of ownership.

## CONCLUSION

"Do digital photography students engaging with print-on-demand social networking technology act as authentic produsers?" We believe that we have demonstrated that the students who were the participants in this research study were produsers, in the way that Bruns describes the produsage process. While the students were not apparently explicitly aware of the potential for a revision stage or stages, the nature of their engagement with the process lends implicit acceptance of the concept.

We consider that the proliferation of social networking and associated technologies means that the opportunities for higher education to incorporate a produsage model, particularly in fields such as arts and media, will multiply. Rather than engaging in retrospective reactive conversations about *faits accomplis,* we recommend that universities blaze trails by proactively pursue research projects in this area.

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