

## **Open to Disruption: Education *either and* Media Practice**

The *Journal of Media Practice* is concerned with media practice *as* research, research *into* media practice and media practice *education*. With the emergence and expansion of media education in digital 'third spaces', networked communities and with open access, we can reasonably add education *as* media practice to these lines of enquiry. Thus, when Gary Hall and colleagues recently made *Open Education: A Study in Disruption* freely downloadable, the pertinence to JMP of this critical experiment appeared striking. The journal's editors, through a visiting tenure between institutions, have a prior relationship with the Disruptive Media Learning Lab at Coventry University, a strand of the Open Media Group from which the text in question is developed. In constructing a review of 'Open', a feeling of wanting to have a conversation grew, in part due to a tension between the book's conviction that hierarchies and exclusions in the academy require disruption and the traditional delimiting of the academic peer review, with its lack of a dialogue between writer and reader. Moreover, rather than assert the conjunction between 'Open Education' and media practice, the opportunity to work this out more discursively by bringing our perspectives to the conversation, transparently, towards 'showing the working' of a book review, seemed palpable.

What follows, then, is a review in the form of extracts from a conversation between JMP and co-authors Gary Hall, Shaun Hides and Jonathan Shaw.

JMP: 'Open' seeks to critically engage with the big questions, from John Henry Newman to Collini about the role of the University in the digital age (see Berger and McDougall, ADD) for a discussion of media education in this equation). The book weaves together, sometimes with inspiring coherence and sometimes more elusively observing 'profound contradictions', connected strands of a temporal 'thing in the world' (my words) – open education - and a more or less aligned project to harness its disruptive potential to re-think the social practices of a University. 'Open' can, though, mean many things and there's a sense of a thousand flowers blooming. The book sets up 'open' as a central term of reference – for activity and practice. Here we are inevitably more concerned with the latter:

SH: What we began with in the department five years ago was an open media strategy, quite close to what people are now describing as open educational resources. We had five core principles. One was about being very tactical about how we use new mobile technologies in media education to open things out and make staff and students work together visibly in new ways. Then there was encouraging engagement through our practices and teaching, with new communities and breaking the boundary of the classroom. Then we were thinking about new ways of becoming sustainable – the idea of that was how media students could get over how do you get a job when there aren't any jobs but also how do you carry on being a critic or creative practitioner when there aren't many people around who want to pay you to do those things? And then there was visibility – we wanted to make our teaching materials and students' work visible in new ways. And the last guiding principle was about collaborative working, students and staff and people outside the institution in audience communities and creative practitioner networks.

JMP: The book is not presented as a utopian or evangelical 'democracy 2.0' celebration, rather the authors carefully account for the neoliberal assault on higher education and the instrumental and economic threats attendant to MOOCs and open source 'delivery' – "Open Education's explicit (and often deliberate) fusion of conservative, liberal, neoliberal and

more radical tendencies and discourses is undoubtedly an important element in this somewhat contradictory picture.” (p24). And so how to work against the grain of a profoundly hegemonic 'open'- or is this a contradiction in terms?

**GH:** Hegemony is defined in two ways – referring to the dominance of one class group over another or as a more generalised political logic. In that way, a society is made up of non-closure, constantly has this tension around it, and that would spin over into our understanding of the politics of open-ness, which are not fixed. So this seems like the important and interesting thing to be doing now, but the politics of open-ness depend on decisions that are made in relation to it, the technology, the historical conjunctions we might be working in, so there's no sense of open being necessarily a mode of resistance, it depends on what you are doing with it and how you're working with it.

**JMP:** going further with this theme of contradiction and conflict, it struck me that taking open educational practice towards some sense of its more disruptive conclusion might lead inevitably to a 'deschooling'? For example, a statement like *“one effective way to understand HEIs is as sites of contestation between divergent constituencies whose needs are often incommensurate and operating on disparate timescales”* (px) which is presented early on in the text as part of a contextual scene setting for the intervention made by open specifically in higher education might seem to leave a very narrow space for more modest, careful disruption as opposed to a more self-destructive 'endgame' for HE practitioners. What basis is there in the authors' experience in their institution for the more optimistic flavour of the book?

**GH:** It's tempting at the moment to think that Universities are spaces where it's very hard to do anything interesting. But the University is one place where it's still possible to do some of these things, where students are protesting and police are beating them up, and so we want to support the University along with Occupy and Free University, those kinds of movements, we want to show that you can do it inside the University.

**SH:** There was just a necessity to assert an optimistic viewpoint, not just self-delusion, but, from Gramsci, optimism of the will. In the department, it became clear that carrying on with the way things had been done before was a road to managed decline. To respond to marketization, league tables, hyper-competition, we needed to adopt a different stance, as much as anything simply to re-articulate the same problems in a different discursive frame brought some results quite quickly. It's not been plain sailing and there's no orthodoxy, no Open Education priesthood in the department, but the optimism came from experiencing how it suddenly opened out possibilities that had been closed off by existing rhetorics and practices and so that energised a group of key people and gave them licence to do some things which in themselves had some concrete, positive effects quite quickly with the classes we were teaching.

**JS:** The origins of the book came out partly from the need for a reaction to, and a UK perspective and a critical stance on all the hype around MOOCs, so we enacted this as rethinking practice through the collaborative nature of the authoring and editing. *New Fotoscapes* and *Open Education* came out simultaneously with that shared approach

**JMP:** In *New Fotoscapes* (a 'partner volume' published with the new Library of Birmingham, a collection of curated conversations on photography in the open, mobile world), Charlotte Cotton warns that creatives and media practice educators might both have a vested interest in preserving a 'false consciousness' (my words) about insulated domains of creative

practice that can be taught about within a vocational modality - she calls this a "reassuringly paternalistic structure". JMP observe a kind of "specialism fetish" at work sometimes both in our own faculty and among the broader academic community. So how can open / disruptive or 'indisciplined' media maintain an idea of discipline – or interdisciplinary 'expertise' and avoid a kind of 'hyper-generic relativism' (again, my words)?

GH: I don't want to talk about the *Journal of Media Practice*, there are all kinds of issues there which I won't go into here. But we started Open Humanities Press precisely to approach some of these issues around open access and prestige, with an international editorial board, vetted any new journals coming on board, working strategically in the same way as with open education, taking some of the same approaches, so it's not an either or it's an *either and*, or an "*and and*", playing the game a little bit, using peer review, an editorial board you can't argue with, playing that side of the game but at the same time trying to push things a little bit, making it possible to experiment, using a Lab space, going back to the optimism – moments of disruption don't have to be reactive (eg to MOOCS, one way or the other), but you can take things in other directions.

JS: That idea of 'either and' is intriguing. The quote from Charlotte about photography practice crosses over to our approach to education. What's happening in photography is that a medium invented to capture motion has become determined by its status as a commercial product and what's happening now is at a subject it's revisiting its birth and the plurality associated with that and the joy when something is fresh and trying to understand its place. I come at this as a practitioner rather than an academic as such, so I had to learn how to be the academic. But the relationship these days is more the academic back into the practitioner and adopting the mechanisms from my photographic practice in the University. Running the Disruptive Media Learning Lab is very reminiscent of how I worked as a freelancer, collaborating across boundaries, it feels like a modelling of that experience, and this perhaps gives us different kinds of insight, we're more comfortable with the disruptive or distributed nature of knowledge, when things are more dispersed, how do you work, how do you move to a more curatorial, conversational stance as opposed to assuming a voice of authority?

JMP: something that stood out, but didn't surprise us, is that Media & Cultural Studies are described as being 'virtually invisible' in the developing world of open education. Is this because the MECCSA community, for example, has been much quicker to 'catch up' with new media practices as 'subject matter' / objects of study but slow to reconfigure its own practice - JMP still publishes more empirical research about media practice than practice as research, for example.

GH: Academics have certain things they can't look at, certain blind spots. It's not only disciplinary boundaries and expertise but also their academic practices, so there are certain things they will look at or think about – the BBC, twitter, online surveillance, but it's very hard for them to look at their own journal publishing practices, for example, use of copyright, for example.

SH: There's a question of scale. What the discipline gives is not just a paternalistic reassurance or the discipline police, that's a long-standing chestnut of ideas about proper categorisation and reassurance and conservative, quite reactionary. But another other way of thinking about disciplines is they're a set of mobilising capabilities and strategies which anybody can pick up and the danger of the grand critique is that it can hold up that neo-liberal critique through capital in action – which is entirely caustic and corrosive of any

structures that gets in its way, so to simply commodify and commercialise everything and to atomise to make everything easily distributable. So to ask on the scale of what might the future of a University be, what might we want to hold onto out of that space and what kinds of experiments might we want to do, is to try to offer a different course through that globalised, neo-colonial version of higher education that is striving to make every bit of educational content into something easily consumable from wherever and however. So to hold onto some of those attributes, values, approaches and critical engagements that disciplines have entailed, but it's got to be reconfigured into a new constellation, a new mode of operation. All the most interesting developments I've seen in recent years have been trans-disciplinary or, as you said, indisciplined but they do come from somewhere, so it's a new dialogue, a new tension we need to resolve.

JMP: How important is technology? Is it possible to imagine 'open' pre-broadband internet? And are students, as consumers paying fees, always responsive or can they be more conservative about 'co-creating' expertise?

GH: Yes!

SH: To be fair, technologies have forced certain questions to come much closer to the surface but the things that are enabling and empowering are much more about the mindset than the bits of kit.

GH: I think so too. I've written about the bible, which is still liquid and living, collaboratively produced, with 30,000 corrections, so texts have always been like this but the changing technology just brings to our attention things we should have been thinking about anyway. When people talk about 'after the digital' now, it's about going back to paper, sharing things, moving away from surveillance, being back in control in ways that Snowden brought to our attention.

SH: usually the commentary on these things over-estimates the initial impact and under-estimates the more profound longer term impacts. It's about cultural technologies in the more complex sense.

JS: on the student experience, at the point of being explicit about this way of working, from course to department level, every single metric has increased for the better. Numbers have increased, engagement with what we are judged and valued on has increased. So the evidence suggests that for us, it's the right way of working.

SH: there are a number of institutions that have gone way beyond what we're doing and have put all the course materials online in an open access repository. And if all we'd done was that, I think students would have every right to say 'really, you just give us the lecture and people outside have access to that?' But that's a long way from what we did, the idea of making materials openly accessible, it focussed people on why students needed to be in the classroom – it clearly couldn't any longer be about content, it was a rich and complex set of interactions, working through, practical activity and dialogue. There have been one or two moments where concerns have been raised. Some students didn't want to be involved in activist media making, as opposed to the BBC etc. What it meant was that we weren't articulating clearly enough that they needed to understand their futures in new ways, not that we want to make you into activists, but into the kinds of people that could be activists. What this approach does is at least make you address your conservative expectations more forthrightly than you might have done otherwise. We are transparent in our ethos – that we're not offering a straightforward approach to teaching media practice, terrible cliché but we've "walked the walk".

JS: for all parties, it raises consciousness about how you're working. Coursework is no longer locked away, how you react in a classroom is no longer hidden, it's out there. That's the

game-changer, both for the person leading the session, but also for the students in the experience.

Julian McDougall (Co-Editor)

Participants in the conversation – Gary Hall, Shaun Hides, Jonathan Shaw.

### **References**

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