From Eden to Agora: The E-Learning Trading Zone

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Abstract

E-learning is not just a learning and teaching innovation; it also signals a shift in human cognition and communication. The lexicon of e-learning borrows from the barren lexicon of information science: of users, usage and usability (Gould and Lewis, 1985), or of information-seeking and affordances (Pirolli and Card, 1999). Deep e-learning requires a more fecund idiom, a new myth: of the *digital agora*, an e-learning 'trading zone' (Mills and Huber, 1995). Here we reflect on the process of shaping an electronic version of our generic doctoral skills sessions, during which it occurred to us that, to match the benefits of interactivity in face-to-face teaching and learning and to be transformative of academic subjectivity, e-learning must be truly performative, rather than merely informative; e-learners (and e-teachers too) must *enact* the skills they hope to learn (or teach).

Keywords: academic identity, e-learning, memory theatre, pedagogy, performativity, trading zone.

Introduction: Eden or agora?

E-learning is not just a learning and teaching innovation; it also signals a shift in human cognition and communication. It moves us from the world of the book, which is linear and literal, to the systemic and numerical world of the screen – with all that this implies for knowledge and identity, for meaning- and soul-making (Flusser, 2007). But what does it mean for classroom learning and teaching to shift into the literally superficial and accelerated world of the electronic word?

We teachers do not yet have a myth to ground this new mode of education. Instead, we borrow the technical language of information science: of users, usage and usability (Gould and Lewis, 1985), or of information-seeking and affordances (Pirolli and Card, 1999).

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And we – and, more importantly, our institutions – are easily seduced by its promise. E-learning is seen as a digital Eden, where the fruit of knowledge is there 24/7 all year round to be sampled in any wired environment (Loader, 1997). (Our institutions, to play devil's advocate, like it because it looks cheaper – and because students say they like it.) And it is often seen as a nostrum for student learning deficits because it is thought to engage so-called 'digital natives' (Bennett and Maton, 2010). But, in practice, e-learning often defaults to information 'transmission', to delivery rather than engagement, or 'transaction' (Miller and Seller, 1985: 17). The language of the factory corrupts our educational Eden (Flusser, 1999); 'interpassivity' rules (Žižek, 1998: 483).

We need a new myth. Will it be a myth of hope, where e-learning technology liberates teachers and learners? Or a myth of decline, where e-learning is yet another false paradise, bound to fail because it remains oriented to information transmission? Could e-learning offer education a redeemed Eden, or does it at its best replicate the *agora* [assembly place], the marketplace, a zone where ideas as well as goods were traded (Gorman, 2004; Mills and Huber, 1995), a place sometimes dicey, edgy and dodgy? Here we argue for the latter: a digital agora, the currency of which is knowledge and the profit, identity.

Our reflection was sparked by the digitisation of a generic doctoral skills programme at The University of Auckland, which highlighted for us the practical and pedagogical implications of shifting from the 'analog' to the digital medium. Because our programme is optional and not examined, and doctoral skills teaching is a developing field, our shift into e-learning may have played out slightly differently from faculty-based teachers'; however, others are likely to be similarly nudged into reflection on their teaching philosophy by the process of shifting medium. Our shift led us to seek out ways to transform e-learning, for us and our students – to make it genuinely interactive, and thus transformative – although we cannot claim that the resulting site was an unequivocal success. What did happen, ironically, as we rethought e-learning beyond the neoliberal frame of market-driven education, was that we arrived back at a truly liberal marketplace of ideas: the agora of Classical Greece, albeit reconceived as a 'learning space' (Boys, 2011; see Rheingold, 1994 and Poster, 1997).

Pedagogy: from learning to e-learning

For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them.

– Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics* (2005: 28–29; 1103a30)

For both of us, as teachers, the intuitive interaction, or 'reflection-in-action' (Schön, 1983: 49–63), of the classroom is where the action is. In such 'practical reasoning', as Stephen Brookfield puts it in *The Skillful Teacher* (2006: 7), we 'call on our own intuition' in teaching, looking for patterns recognisable from past experience through affective cues and diagnostic clues. We want students to engage similarly – 'mindfully' (Langer, 1997) – with their experience. For us, this implies that, to match the benefits of this 'interactivity' in face-to-face teaching and learning (dialogue, formative feedback, and so on), e-learning must be *performative*, rather than *informative*: a website, for example, must not just tell us about the skills we aim to develop, but must enable us to practise them, and not just by doing exercises, but in the way we interact with the medium (see Butler, 2010: 147). For example, to learn to think critically online, we must think critically (to adapt Aristotle), but to do so, we must *navigate* critically. Similarly, *Wikipedia* informs us, but if we do it right, we perform it; we become 'editors' and 'wiki'. Only in this way can e-learning be truly interactive. This is learning as 'e-tivity' (Salmon, 2002), potentially as engaged and dynamic as classroom talk. And such learning is not only about interactivity; it is also about identity, about 'learning to be' (Brown and Adler, 2008: 19) – or to *bE*. Learning occurs when the learner is able to connect with the topic, when they engage fully with it, internalise it, 'get' it. They come away with something they did not possess before, and having it changes them: it is transformative (this is real 'deep learning' [Marton and Säljö, 1976]). How e-learning can help or hinder this kind of genuinely interactive and thus transformative learning is our focus here.

Myth, identity, soul: three ideas of e-learning

Knowledge is the food of the soul.

 – Plato, *Protagoras* (1871: 122; 313c)

Given this pedagogical premise, we can sketch three ideas of e-learning: the mythic, the social and the 'psychic', viz., e-learning as a new Eden, 'e-dentity' and ensoulment. The thread that unites them is the ancient (and medieval) idea that knowledge and the soul are linked, as espoused by Socrates in the *Protagoras*. The word 'soul' might sound off-puttingly non-secular for some; for us, it emphasises education's connection to what is most authentic about us, whether that is conceived as subjective (our 'inner self') or intersubjective (our 'humanity'). Education – teaching, learning and scholarship all – is axiological (Hart, 1971); it is about values, ethical and aesthetic (about what is good and what is beautiful) in action.

E-learning as Edenic

Identity can be examined psychologically (as do, for example, social behaviourists like G.H. Mead [1934], who declared the self to be a social construct arising out of a 'social process [of] interaction' [164]). But it can also be framed – along with the learning that informs it – *mythically*. Myths are characteristically enigmatic and multiply interpretable, which suits them for individual 'identification' (Bruner, 1960: 62).

There is no more foundational myth in Western culture and the canon than that of the *locus amoenus* [refuge] of the Garden of Eden, with its Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil (Genesis, 2-3). Traditionally, the moral of this myth has been taken to be that knowledge is inherently problematic, or at least, that desire for it is transgressive rather than innovative and liable to punishment rather than reward. The punishment of having to sweat it out on earth might well represent the labour that comes with the responsibility of knowledge. (Indeed, 'flexible' digital teaching can be a labour for 'inflexible' teachers.) However, perhaps e-learning might be better mythologised as a fortunate fall (a *felix culpa* in Latin), fortunate since it led to a world wherein knowledge informed human agency – as well as intelligent love (compare Milton's *Paradise Lost* [2000] for the idea that paradise might be inside ourselves and only achievable once we *renounce* the innocence of ignorance). E-learning might open up new ways of learning through which we might be 'imparadised', as Milton (2000: 86; 4:506) so persuasively puts it, though which we can expand our scholarly identities.

This is how our institutions often see e-learning: as a digital Eden, one where the fruit is overly plentiful and unbounded by seasonality – always 'on', as academics are now expected to be. They do so out of fiscal expediency, but also out of a desire to be responsive to the perceived learning needs and styles of students (not to mention their *life*styles), students whom they perceive as digital natives rather than digital 'settlers' like themselves. Nonetheless, whether through ignorance or through misdirection – because most of the decision-makers know little about e-learning and allow it to be captured by libraries, with their information literacy model – e-learning reverts to a transmission model of learning focused on delivering information in a one-way fashion: by download (one-way) and non-'conditionally' (*one* way; see Langer, Hatem, Joss, and Howell, 1989).

E-learning as e-dentity

The foundational Eden myth is also ripe for problematising the relation of identity and knowledge. Elsewhere, the Fall – the idea that with knowledge comes responsibility (though not necessarily accountability) – has been linked to finding a voice in academic writing, a voice that needs to be both situated in academic practice and critical of that situatedness, that is to say, asserting and reflecting on its embodied, multiple positionality (see Carter, 2012). The self-fashioning of an academic identity is *between* good and evil, rather than *beyond* it, perhaps, to twist Friedrich Nietzsche's evocation of 'autopoesis' (1998).

Now, there is no lack of higher education literature that problematises education institutionally (Rowland, 2006), or as a career (Austin, 2002b), and in terms of gender (Acker and Armenti, 2004), race (Zamel, 1995), and so on. And it must be said that more splendidly multiple does not always mean better; this puts us in mind of the myth of the Tower of Babel (Genesis, 11: 1-9), wherein a once unified and transparent language was replaced by a multiple and opaque 'confusion of tongues' (see Eco, 1995). Similarly, higher education today is marked by disciplinary differences and domains, which our myths of e-learning must reflect.

The myth of Eden emerges from a religious tradition that saw learning as growing the spirit, as an *askesis* [self-control] or 'care of the self' – or, indeed, of the soul, to adapt Foucault (1988: 68). Although we secularise this tradition of soul-craft here, we retain the emphasis on identity (see Carter, 2012), and, like Foucault (1988: 51), we see this 'care of the self' as 'not an exercise in solitude, but a true social practice'. E-learning does seem to allow us to transcend our bodily limitations or those of gender through virtual embodiment, which was how the Web seemed to early adopters like Sherry Turkle (1997: 212ff). But we see its future in bodily transformation: in the performance of knowledge and thus identity.

E-learning as ensoulment

Eden's Tree of Knowledge inaugurated the problem of knowledge and the soul (or self) in the Western tradition; the Tower of Babel added the problem of language – ambiguity on ambiguity. In these early myths, knowledge is never for its own sake, in fact, knowledge for its own sake is sinful; it should further a divine purpose. Augustine (1838) is exemplary in this regard: for him, 'divine purpose' is served (the pun is his) by *cogitare* that is *colligere* – in Latin, 'thinking' that is 'collecting', or rather, 'recollecting' (192; 11.18): *cogitare* [to think] is *colligere* [to collect or recollect]. As academics digging amongst detail, it is easy for us to lose sight of any higher purpose in our research, but values, reflective or not, underlie our work – and our identity: hence our reference to axiology, the so-called 'science' of value.

Augustine theorises the interrelationship of body, mind and soul in a way that aligns with digital practice. Compare his description of memory as a 'great receptacle' in *The Confessions* (Augustine, 1838: 190; 10.14):

> All these [things] doth that great harbour of the memory receive in her numberless secret and inexpressible windings, to be forthcoming, and brought out at need; each entering in by own gate, and there laid up. Nor yet do the things themselves enter in; only the images of the things perceived, are there in readiness, for thought to recall. (Augustine, 1838: 189; 10.13)

This passage aptly describes the flexibility of e-learning: you can hyperlink as far as time and desire allow. An e-learning site can be one huge repository; the only challenge is finding what you want. Similarly, for Augustine, as Mary Carruthers (2008: xi) puts it, ideas lurk in memory – or in sites – 'like animals hunted from their lairs, whose tracks and vestiges are to be followed through their familiar pathways in the forest'. Building an e-learning site entails deciding how many links there should be and how they ought to be laid out, and how much users ought to be allowed to stumble about on the hunt for their quarry of choice. These hunters through digital labyrinths, or 21st-century scholars, are thinking, 'talking' and learning – unbeknownst to them – in accordance with ancient mnemonics: thus, the networked busy-ness of the 'digitas' (Samuels, 2008) has uncanny parallels with ancient understandings of memory and soul-making.

In *The Self We Live by* (2009: 9), Holstein and Gubrium declare that 'the postmodern avant garde [...] said that contemporary life and its instantaneous electronically mediated images had simply blown the social self away, leaving in its wake only myriad signs of itself swirling about where substantiality once resided'. Perhaps, however, just as the simple word of Edenic language is transformed once it is secularised (which adaptation is learning in itself), the self is not so much evaporating as finding itself 'etherized'. It can now occupy multiple spaces simultaneously – and knowledge and identity are correspondingly multiplied. Tribble and Keane launch their study of early modern religion, *Cognitive Ecologies and the History of Remembering* (2011: 1), with a parable about insects:

> Andy Clark has explored the relationship between cognition and environment through an extended meditation upon the predicament of the mole cricket. These creatures attract their mates through song, but their minute size renders them incapable of producing sounds loud enough to travel. However, they solve this problem environmentally: by creating underground burrows that greatly amplify their sound. […] Human beings, Clark argues, likewise create 'cognitive singing burrows',

environments and artifacts that extend our reach beyond the 'ancient fortress of skin and skull'. (Referring to Clark, 2005 and quoting Clark, 2003: 5)

When a café table of friends communicate by text with digital friends (or 'friends') who are physically absent, it can seem that social exchange, freed from flesh, has allowed a doubling, an expansion of self. But we are not far from the sociality of the early church, the virtual community of the *communio fidelium* [communion of believers] who worshipped in catacombs – 'singing burrows' of a sort – and communicated by epistle.

For us, there is a closer link between e-learning and ancient mnemonics in the values, or axiology, that they imply. Carruthers identifies the values inherent in the memory arts, ones that resonate with the teaching pedagogy of our Doctoral Skills Programme: that research-focused and research-informed teaching should also be 'not considered to be merely practical know-how, a useful gimmick that one might indulge in or not (rather like buying better software). It [should be] co-extensive with wisdom and knowledge'; in fact, it ought to be 'morally virtuous in itself' (Carruthers, 2008: 88). (It is something of a postmodern cliché – but one useful for our purposes – that every 'thought' contains an 'ought'.) Though we shy away from a focus on the qualities that bespeak 'moral virtue', so optimistically expressed in the rhetoric of institutional 'graduate attributes' (see The University of Auckland, 2003), we think, nonetheless, that learning, especially if it involves identity work, cannot ignore values.

However, whether or not we conceive of e-learning as axiological, we must nonetheless craft sites as learning spaces (*agorae*). This 'memory craft' has much in common with the classical art of memory taken over by medieval scholars and evoked so persuasively by Frances Yates in *The Art of Memory* (1966).

Crafting e-learning

[P]ersons desiring to train this faculty (of memory) must select places and form mental images of the things they wish to remember and store those images in the places, so that the order of the places will preserve the order of the things, and the images of the things will denote the things themselves. […]
– Cicero, *De Oratore* (1967: 467; 2.86.354 [slightly edited])

We see the Doctoral Skills Programme website as a virtual memory theatre – and site building as digital memory craft: compare Yates's three elements of the classical art of memory derived from the anonymous *Rhetorica ad Herennium* (1954), once attributed to Cicero:

a.   'a series of *loci* or places', viz., the site;

b.   'the images by which the speech is to be remembered', that is, its icons; and

c.   'moving in imagination through [the] memory building', namely, its interactivity, or how we navigate and manipulate it (Yates, 1966: 3, after Quintilian, 1975-76: 11.2.17–22).

Memory craft thus requires us to attend to spatial elements (places), visual elements (images), and the way in which these elements are to be navigated and/or manipulated (interactivity). Digital memory craft posed a set of questions for us:

a.   What 'things' should be nested together?

b.   How should the links between things be best presented visually?

c.   How many links are enough, or too many?

And perhaps most interestingly:

d.   How should 'crafters' interact with the site?

e.   How should crafters interact with each other – and us?

Building a course site thus differs from building a 'normal' course, in which the order of topics requires more linear choices. It involves a shift not only in our thinking as teachers, but also in the way we conceive of students' learning and interaction with us and with each other. This shift into the digital space of social interaction is often challenging for teachers: what changes, and thus challenges us, is not so much the content itself (though this is not to say that it ought not to change) as the way in which the content is 'delivered'. Most teachers revert to type, to unreconstructed teaching, namely, instruction, or information transmission of the most 'old school' kind. Students do likewise when they navigate our sites: they attend to spatial and visual elements, and how these are to be navigated and/or manipulated, albeit most often in a readerly rather than our writerly way; they revert to type as more or less passive recipients of our transmission – although they, unlike their teachers, can opt out.

Similarly, the history of attempts to find better – or, rather, newer – ways to know moves forward by fits and starts, in ways that again parallel academic experience. Guilio Camillo designed and partially built a splendidly ambitious memory theatre that was intended to contain all known knowledge filed in a symbolic system based on the number seven. He was funded by the King of France, who hoped that possession of everything known would give him wisdom, but 'the Idea of the Memory Theatre dissolve[d] into stammering incoherence' (Yates, 1966: 132). Ramon Llull built movement into his art of memory with his enscripted wheels, or 'Lullian Circles', which, when turned, aligned data differently

(Yates, 1966: 176, 180–182). We are reminded of modern proprietary software like Powerpoint, SPSS and Inspiration that shape knowledge similarly.

Embodying e-learning

> [The art of memory] has usually been classed as 'mnemotechnics', which in modern times seems a rather unimportant branch of human activity. But in the ages before printing a trained memory was vitally important; and the manipulation of images in memory must always to some extent involve the psyche as a whole.
>
> – Frances Yates, *The Art of Memory* (1966: xi)

If, as Andy Clark (2003: 5) would have it, the digitas provides 'singing burrows' for individuals to 'amplify' themselves more effectively, how might this affect the venerable anxiety in the West about how body and soul (or identity) relate? Again, we can take our cues from the medievals. In *Fragmentation and Redemption* (1991), Caroline Bynum investigates the links between body and soul in the Middle Ages. For example, she shows how fasting and flagellation drove flesh to serve spirit, as anorexia does in modernity. More apposite to our argument, she speculates on the ghoulish habit of chopping bits off saints' bodies so that the body parts might serve to effect miracles at a distance (Bynum, 1991: 241–242) – shadows of e-teaching's links to other sites, perhaps. Further, she compares medieval 'soul-body dualisms' to modern theories, in which '"soul" has been discarded': namely, 'a version of the memory theory ('I am my continuous stream of memory'); [or] a theory of material continuity ('I am my body' or ... 'I am a particular part of my body: my brain')' (Bynum, 1991: 247). E-learning, and the disembodied self it seems to imply, cannot help but trouble this reductive physicalism.

As teachers, part of whose role is to enable learners to construct an academic identity, which requires us to construct our own, we see it as our task to *assemble* our embodied teaching-and-learning selves. In the classroom, we engage with students by presenting our embodied selves. Students can see how we are composite creatures, how, as Laurie Finke puts it (1992: 13), '[e]very utterance is always inhabited by the voice of the "other", or of many others, because the interests of race, class, gender, ethnicity, age, and any number of other related "accents" intersect in any utterance'. More importantly, we can see who they are and adapt what we do accordingly. In the digitas, we are seemingly disembodied, disconnected in large part from the fleshly evidence of our multiplicity. We say *in large part* because, although the digitas might, as Lisa Samuels (2008) puts it, 'resonat[e] with civitas,

digital acts, habitus' and, of course, 'the digits we call our fingers', we have wrestled with how this 'embodied knowing' might work (1), how e-learning might 'involve the psyche as a whole' (Yates, 1966: xi).

A case study: the University of Auckland Doctoral Skills Programme site

[A] dream of learning; a thing sweet and varied, and that would be thought to have in it something divine.

– Francis Bacon, *On the Advancement of Learning* (1861: 336; 3.1)

A generic support site for doctoral students

What prompted this article, in fact, was the construction of a digital version of five sessions from a generic support programme for doctoral students, The University of Auckland's Doctoral Skills Programme (DSP), on which Susan Carter took the lead and in which Sean Sturm participated as presenter and peer reviewer (Carter, 2011) (see Figure 1).

It was felt that a digital version of the course was necessary because some students were unable to attend classroom sessions since they worked either in paid employment or care-giving, and because it would provide a useful 'back-up' for those who had been able to attend. In designing the site, the challenge was to replicate or, rather, replace in some way the face-to-face 'interactivity' that sustains the DSP classroom and the sense of communal practice vital for doctoral students, who primarily work alone. For us, such collegial sharing – or the practice of an *ennested community of practice* (see Bruffee, 1999: 46–47) – is the key to the socialisation of doctoral candidates into the academic community. Whether or not the site met this challenge is moot.

Figure 1. University of Auckland Doctoral Skills Programme site

Milne and Dimmock's (2006) principles for e-learning pedagogy in New Zealand offered us a practicable model for learning, offline or, indeed, online. For them, a local e-learning artefact should be

1. learner-centred,
2. collaborative,
3. innovative, and
4. sustainable;

but, perhaps more importantly for us, they should

5. 'follow and share good practice', and
6. 'focus on New Zealand's unique identity' (10).

To enable our version of an ennested community of doctoral practice to emerge, we wanted to focus on the sharing of academic practice and on academic identity (because many of our students' relationship to 'New Zealand identity' is complex, vexed even). After all,

what prompted us to create the site was the demand for equitable access to information and interaction at a distance and in their own time of the University's about 300 part-time doctoral candidates, whose needs are often complex and not easily met by on-campus generic workshops during working hours.

Learning designers at The University of Auckland helped us to build the site. They brought their cycle of e-pedagogy, which moves from

1. the assessment of student need; to
2. the design of the site, and
3. its use; to
4. feedback and
5. reflection, followed by
6. fine-tuning of the design.

At their suggestion, we decided to build the site in stages. First, we were to put our handouts onto pages (almost always the first step for digital settlers in building a site, it seems!), create short informational videos, and add links and perhaps exercises. Then, we were to construct 'bloggy' spaces for students to talk, and finally, to make short videos, mostly of staff but including some of students 'studenting'. They also advised us about the ins-and-outs of digital mediatisation, for example, about how long the videos should ideally be (make them less than two minutes) and about how to get good video performances (prime the 'performers' by relaxing them).

We built the site over eighteen months with the help of an assistant funded from a University of Auckland Learning Enhancement Grant (LEG). Along with a learning designer who was expert in 'coaching' performers, we conducted five video sessions with approximately forty academic staff and recent doctoral graduates. What resulted was sixty videos on aspects of doctoral study, including the thesis proposal, the writing process, the literature review, citation and the oral examination, which complement the information, links and comment pages that make up the site. The 'finished' site is an exquisite artefact, which exceeded our expectations and to which students have responded very positively by visiting the site frequently and repeatedly. According to the Google Analytics statistics for the site, from July 1, 2011 to July 1, 2014 there were 31,097 pageviews (25,022 being unique pageviews), which equates to 10,366 pageviews per annum for an average annual doctoral enrolment of approximately 2000 students. (We would note that the site is only viewable by staff and students of the University.) There was a bounce rate of 33.36% (the bounce rate meaning the percentage of viewers who navigate away after viewing only one page, 50% or

less being regarded as an excellent rate). On average, viewers spent 1 minute 32 seconds on each page (with 45% of the pageviews being by returning users), the most popular pages being those on research proposals, the oral examination and the literature review, in that order. They were clearly attracted to the site, but whether it was interactive was the question we asked ourselves.

Self-evaluating the site

To recall: the challenge was to replicate or, rather, replace in some way the face-to-face 'interactivity' that sustains the DSP classroom and the sense of communal practice vital for doctoral students. We knew that the site gave students (and us teachers) spatial and temporal flexibility – but at the price of such face-to-face interaction (see Ferguson, 2008: 2). In-class questions like 'How do you do this stuff with two little kids?' prompted conversations and reflections that were helpful to the whole class because most doctoral students balance competing demands in their lives. As a result, those with children felt a sense of shared challenge, and those without were reminded that research productivity depends on a balanced work-life – or work-work (research-teaching) – regimen (see Austin, 2002a). This prompted us to make time and space in every session for students to talk to each other – and to try to allow for such interaction on and through the site. Originally, we had intended to introduce such interactivity in the site as a second phase, but, talking with learning designers and recent doctoral graduates, we were convinced that it was pedagogically necessary. As a result, we introduced a discussion page to allow doctoral students to add their own talking points and questions.

Figure 2. University of Auckland Doctoral Skills Programme site discussion page

Discussion

Discussion about this session

Because one of the most vital factors of our classrooms is discussion, we invite you to add your comments — points you think will be useful to other doctoral students, questions you hope someone might answer, etc., here.

Please respect the wide readership in posting your comments.

This **Discussion** section, then, does not express the views of the CAD staff who have brought you this website. We are hoping, though, that classroom experience of students' very perceptive and useful contributions will be duplicated here.

As it turned out, students used the discussion page primarily to give us feedback on the site. We had asked for comments that addressed 'problems with the usability [of the

site]', 'aspects that were particularly useful' and 'any further comments or thoughts'. We received positive feedback on most aspects of the site, with the videos that featured students being the most highly valued. Almost all of students' 'further comments' were complimentary: 'very comprehensive'; 'great resource'; 'very well put together'; 'nice visuals'; 'easy to read'. Some wanted more; one felt that the site was 'long overdue'. One pointed out that the 'video clips made the site much more interactive', which was precisely our intention; several noted that hearing students discuss their recent experience of the oral examination was useful and heartening. A couple noted that some of the advice was a bit 'negative' or 'ambiguous', although others liked the tenor of the same advice: '[I] liked the quote. […] I can relate to that'; 'hearing […] something that is very rarely discussed is incredibly helpful'. While we would have preferred the site to foster interaction between students, rather than just between individual students and us, this material gave us plenty of information about their interaction with the site that will feed into our updated version of it.

Another flexibility of the site became apparent as we put it together: that students can choose how to navigate it. Whereas, in the classroom, the teacher orders and paces the discussion, watching students for cues and occasionally indulging herself in what she thinks might be promising, students can navigate the 'labyrinth' of the session in the order that seems most promising to them and at their own pace. This centres learning in the student. According to the Google Analytics, students chose to navigate to what interested them best via the dropdown menu, rather than navigating in the order set in advance by us.

Ultimately, however, although we delighted in the way the site took on its own life in the process of (co-)building, we came to realise that its true transformative value should be as a place of exchange, an agora, or *e-gora* (see Poster, 1997; Rheingold, 1994), the currency of which was knowledge and its profit, identity (or e-dentity, perhaps). As Carruthers has argued in her work on memory-craft as soul-craft, though most mnemotechnics relied on elaborate systems to encode knowledge, these systems were not about rote memory, but about the development of the soul: about identity and values. The design process taught us that our site, at its best, might work likewise.

Conclusion: performing e-learning – the e-gora

The giving back of what is already known, and the interpretation of a given text per se and as it stands, as metaphors and indicators of learning, are challenged by a performative and transformative view of learning and knowing [in which] to learn something is to be able to convert information stored in the expanding external

symbolic storages of our social memory into something that is new, interesting and consequential....

– Roger Saljo, 'Digital Tools and Challenges to Institutional Traditions of Learning' (2010: 62)

While the Doctoral Skills Programme site might not have met our lofty aspirations for it, it enabled us to reflect on what performative e-dentity might look like: how we must learn how to *perform* as teachers and learners in the ennested community of practice that is the digitas. Though medieval mnemonists failed to develop knowledge labyrinths fully, we can make use of their recognition that meaning-making must enable soul-making; we need to find new ways to capture the transformative moments of conceptual 'threshold crossing' in interactive learning (Kiley & Wisker, 2009). Yam San Chee (2011) models learning as a performative process of becoming, of 'performance, play and dialog[ue]': the 'PPD' model (108). Though he is concerned with learning through gaming, the same drama of becoming underlies other learning in the digitas: such performance is meaning- and soul-making that at once produces knowledge and identity. As he puts it,

> All performance can be approached in terms of faking, making, breaking, and staking. Performance holds possibilities to imitate a life world, to create a life world, to transform a life world, and to stake claims about that life world. (2011: 109)

His model of performative learning thus secularises the axiology (science of values) inherent in the memory arts: such learning should be 'co-extensive with wisdom and knowledge', in fact, 'morally virtuous in itself' (Carruthers, 2008: 88).

Students can, preferably *with* their teachers, shape the content: they can create the material ('play'); feed back on it by offering comments on it or, even better, by simply doing it, when their feedback generates user statistics ('dialogue'); and practise critique by commenting on each other's material or performance, and by enacting it through writing ('performance'). In turn, that content will shape, or transform, them – as we noted is true of *Wikipedia* when it makes us all editors. The PPD model is also relevant to teachers in the digitas because they may find themselves as much learners in this digital world as their students. Initially, they must become familiar with the alien world of the digitas ('fake') and learn from their own making ('make'); then, they must question what they think they know and their sense of self ('break') to stake a claim there ('stake'). Ideally, then, both teachers and students shape the content and, in turn, are shaped by the process of learning to perform in the digitas. Such a performative model of soul-making suggests a new model of scholarly

identity or soul-making, 'Scholarly Identity 2.0', that combines 'user-generated' and 'traditional' content and communication (Habib, 2013).

Thus, at its best, the e-learning space replicates the *agora*, a zone where ideas as well as goods were traded, where, as Howard Rheingold (1994: xxx) puts it, 'citizens met to talk, gossip, argue, size each other up, find the weak spots in political ideas by debating about them'. In our digital agora, or e-gora, the currency is knowledge and the profit, identity. In his prescient vision of the Web, Rheingold captures the two extremes of the agora:

> [it is] a tool that could bring conviviality and understanding into our lives and might help revitalize the public sphere. The same tool, improperly controlled and wielded, could become an instrument of tyranny. The vision of a citizen-designed, citizen-controlled worldwide communications network ... could be called the vision of 'the electronic agora'. […] But another kind of vision could apply to the use of the Net in the wrong ways, a shadow vision of a less utopian kind of place – the Panopticon. (1994: xxx)

We have arrived via the neoliberal frame of market-driven education with its vision of a digital Eden as cheap and engaging (Rheingold's panoptical 'shadow vision') back at the truly liberal marketplace of ideas: the agora, albeit reconceived as a learning space (Rheingold's civil 'electronic agora') (see Poster, 1997). This is the new myth of e-learning that was the upshot of our first foray into digital memory craft. As e-teachers, we side with what David Holmes (2005) calls the 'communitarian agora', not the 'cosmopolitan agora' (197), the tradition of the local 'assembly' rather than the global 'market'. We take the e-gora to be a new spin on Augustine's idea of knowledge as *cogitare* that is *colligere*, as 'thinking' that is '(re)collecting' (192; 11.18). For us, knowledge – or meaning-making – is literally *collegial*, about gathering to learn.

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