Shaping Higher Education with Students
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Published by University College London

Tong, Vincent C. H., et al.
Shaping Higher Education with Students: Ways to Connect Research and Teaching.
University College London, 2018.

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3.1

Why We Post – a team approach to research dissemination

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This chapter discusses the way that nine anthropologists formed a team that disavowed our differences as staff or students. It shows how we collaborated equally to create a strategy for research dissemination that recognised the huge audience for a project on the use and consequences of social media. All aspects of research and writing were conducted in direct collaboration and much of what has resulted has been collectively authored.

To try and reach as diverse an audience as possible, we re-conceptualised research dissemination as a spectrum. We started by writing journal articles for academic consumption, and then moved to eleven open-access books written in a highly accessible style. Following this we created a massive open online course (MOOC) on the FutureLearn platform and then, for the widest appeal, we created a website called ‘Why We Post’ that includes over 100 films, many stories and announces our results as ‘discoveries’. Apart from the books, all our materials are translated into all the languages of our fieldsites. All of this was possible only through combining the skills and language knowledge of our team as a whole.
1. Introduction

Discussing what has flashed across our smartphone screens may have finally surpassed the weather as our favourite topic of conversation. Items on the social and cultural consequences of social media appear daily in our newspapers. So it would be a great pity if the academic contribution to the understanding of this topic did not at least attempt to reach the vast audiences who might be interested in the result. In this study, we consider the results of nine anthropologists, each of whom spent 15 months on fieldsites all around the world to study the use and consequences of social media in a project funded by the European Research Council ERC grant 2011-AdG-295486 Socnet.

In this instance, our ambition was closely connected to a method of research and engagement that may be more common in the natural sciences but is quite rare in social science: collaborative team effort. Although our group consisted of researchers at different stages of their academic careers – postgraduates, postdoctoral staff and a professor – we only ever changed our collective ideas about what to research and how to research based on a simple discussion and vote. Very unusually we decided that the PhD students would write their books before writing their PhDs, so as to be synchronised with the rest of the team. During the fieldwork all nine researchers focused on the same topic each month, exchanging extensive notes before moving on to the next topic. The writing-up of the nine monographs followed the same procedure, with all but one book chapter being written simultaneously under the same heading. Much of what was produced for the MOOC and website were created collectively and anonymously. This commitment to a genuinely collaborative and comparative project was essential to the subsequent dissemination of our findings.

2. Connecting with our audiences

Once we accept that this research is of interest to an extremely diverse audience, we need to see research dissemination not as a single thing, but as a spectrum that can span that diversity. At the most academic end are the journal articles, which we expect to be read only by academics and so made no concessions in their writing style. However, we provide the core of our results in 11 open-access volumes being published by UCL Press. This is where we can exploit the rich stories and poignant instances
of personal engagement that make up so much of an ethnographic study. For this reason, citations and discussions of other academics are mainly found in footnotes. The first three books of the series were launched on 29 February 2016. The fact that there have already been over 320,000 downloads from our books worldwide (as of December 2017) suggests that our desire to connect with a wider readership was warranted.

In recent years, traditional forms of lecturing have been challenged by the rise of free e-learning courses known as MOOCs. Recently the Open University developed its own initiative through a platform called FutureLearn. For various reasons this was our preferred platform. We were fortunate that at just the right moment UCL signed an arrangement with FutureLearn, and so we were chosen to create the first UCL FutureLearn course. Rather than using traditional lectures, the steps of a MOOC typically consist of short videos of the kind that we were producing.

The English-language version of the course will repeat three times in 2016: in February, June and October. As is common for such courses, the 13,000 people who registered reduced to some 5,000 ‘learners’ during the course, but, unlike most classes that we teach, these people are voluntarily undertaking education in their spare time. The degree of participation on every step of the course has been impressive: one of the more theoretical components, an argument for a new definition of social media as ‘scalable sociality,’ received over 1,000 comments from participants by the end of the course’s first delivery. The course was produced entirely in-house with the infographics created by Xinyuan Wang (one of the team) and most of the films made by Cassie Quarless, a student on the UCL MSc in Digital Anthropology, who had also produced the films for our Trinidad fieldsite. In a way, a MOOC is itself a form of interactive social media, and all the team enjoyed the direct participation of taking part in these conversations that followed from comments by those taking the course.

The audience for this course was clearly global, as the map in Figure 3.1.1 shows. There were more than a hundred registered students from places as diverse as Ukraine, Mexico, Indonesia and Russia. Typical students are people studying social media, or anthropology, around the world.

Such e-learning courses often tend to attract older audiences who may already have a university degree, as this is clearly a university/college-level format. To reach still wider audiences, we also created a website called ‘Why We Post’ (www.ucl.ac.uk/why-we-post), where we announce our results as ‘discoveries’ with comments from each of the fieldsites. The site also includes over a hundred short films and many stories to enhance the popular appeal.
3. Spreading the word across languages

One critical limitation to all of this would be language. Most of our informants, like most of the world’s population, do not speak English. We therefore used some of our funding to translate the entirety of the MOOC and website into the seven languages of our fieldsites in addition to English. This required subtitling 130 films in English and then managing the subsequent 910 individual pieces of translation, all of which was managed by Laura Happio-Kirk, who had also to ensure that what was said in the films did not thereby lose any of its anthropological inflection. At present, FutureLearn does not support multiple languages and we do not have the long-term resources for our own online engagement in these languages, so the foreign language MOOCs sit on an alternative platform developed by UCL called UCLeXtend. Our Portuguese site already has over 1,300 followers and we have barely begun the publicity.

Finally, we have two more strategies to attempt to engage still more widely. One is to integrate our material into the National Curriculum in schools, for example within the A-level (i.e. university entrance examinations offered in England, Wales and Northern Ireland) courses for anthropology and sociology. The other has been to reach low-income colleges in South Asia with poor internet access through distributed DVD copies of the course in Tamil. When
distributing these individual copies, we always explain to educators that since all our material is under a Creative Commons licence, they are free to incorporate it under their own local certification schemes. Once again, we have benefited from a team approach that exploits our combined languages and skills to do so much more than any one of us could have accomplished alone.