

When we have never been human, what is to be done? Exploring posthumanism within the context of networked learning.

Ailsa Haxell

School of Interprofessional Health Studies, Faculty of Health and Environmental Sciences, Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand, ailsa.haxell@aut.ac.nz

Abstract

This paper contributes to the growing interest in a posthuman turn within education. While posthumanism has been of interest in the humanities and in social sciences, a lack of conceptualisation of posthumanism within networked learning has been to networked learning's loss. In this paper, I engage with this concern through responding to a question posed by Donna Haraway, "When we have never been human, what is to be done?" In the first of three movements, I bring forward the very ordinariness of our posthuman condition. Conceptualising posthumanism as a very ordinary manifestation allows for conversations that need not wait for the arrival of, nor self-identification with, an exotic or semi-alien entity. There is no need to wait for some evolutionary manifestation involving some sense of advanced or superior beings. We need not wait on the arrival of some oddity. Taking, the very ordinariness of the posthuman condition as our common state, the second movement then brings forward appreciation for relationality. This second movement follows a logical progression from accepting ourselves as being made in association to seeing other entities as similarly co-constructed. This second movement positions technology as more than a mediator. Rather than technology being positioned as something we might use, technology is presented as an actor of influence both shaped and shaping. In the third movement, a more political stance is brought to designs for networked learning. A decentered approach to network learning allows not only for the influence of myriad actors to be traced but also provides a challenge for how the voices of quieter actors might be heard. Theorising networked learning and design for networked learning, begs the question as to whose stories are told and whose perhaps should be. In the telling of such stories, however, representation becomes a challenge: In whose language should such stories be told? Should a story be told in the in the storytellers "voice" or does it require the language a reader is accustomed to? In this short paper, I make use of an experimental method to bring forward the voice of an otherwise silent actor. In this particular telling, there is a playful provocation for a narrative told differently. With the ability to hear voices different to one's own, a glimpse of realities different from one's own might then be known.

Keywords

Actor-network theory, Posthumanism, Networked learning

A Posthumanist turn for networked learning

As argued by Latour (1993) in "*We Have Never Been Modern*", dualism has not served us well. Making distinctions between the natural and the social denies an inescapable entanglement. This denial is problematic within education where, consciously or not, educators and educational researchers have tended toward a humanistic bias, one that tends toward an individualistic focus, and which somewhat strangely allows for a separation of knowledge from those who would teach or learn (Fenwick, Edwards, & Sawchuk, 2011). This paper, therefore, draws a attention to our entanglements.

There is growing traction for exploring posthumanism within education (see for example Edwards, 2010; Fenwick & Landri, 2012; Snaza et al., 2014). Such writers position the post in posthumanism not as a signifier of some evolutionary development in a digital age, but as a means of moving beyond the individualised human focus common to much education theorizing. This paper contributes to this postmodern discourse in education

as a means for exploring how a very how the very ordinariness of our posthuman condition might better inform our understanding, and perhaps design, of networked learning spaces.

When we have never been human, what is to be done?

Three movements are presented demonstrating the ease with which posthumanism might inform design for networked learning.

First movement; We have never been human

A provocative title in *Scientific America* espouses “You are more bacteria than you are you” (Wenner 2007). To be human, according to *Nature Review*, “is to be outnumbered by our microbial ‘mates’ at a rate of 10 to 1” (Ray, 2012, p. 555). Such microorganisms are not just carried, but engage with us intimately, synthesizing essential vitamins through to breaking down nondigestible products (Flint, Scott, Louis, & Duncan, 2012). Without such companionable species, as we need for digestion, we would die.

The example suggests that in our very ordinary status we are already “post”, for we have never been just human.

Second movement; Sociomaterialism at play

My timetabled teaching occurs in a lecture theatre live-linked to three geographically separate campuses. Such large class teaching is also video-captured for the benefit of students who may not be able to attend or for those who wish to revise a lecture. I am in class when connecting to the Internet fails. The vulnerability of multi-site teaching is paralysed when more people access the bandwidth than it is able sustain. An internet phenomenon as seemingly trivial as “what colour is this dress” requires a renegotiation of connectivity on many levels.

Franklin (1999) talks of technologies as practice rather than as object. She positions technology as process, as verb rather than as a noun. This brings forward a the construct of technology not as a tool but as a participant. As shown in the example above technology is not an idle participant but is, in actor-network terms, an actor of influence.

Third movement; When we have never been human, what is to be done?

Framing networked learning, Carvalho and Goodyear (2014) note there is no consistent understanding of what the arena of networked learning involves nor any consistent differentiation that would delineate networked learning from learning networks. Their approach is to provide a focus for “how people learn with and from each other when much or all of their interaction is mediated by digital communications technology” (p.4). This framing sustains a human-centric approach in networked learning that prevents an appreciation for how we are made in connection with out technologies just as they also are being shaped in connection with ourselves. Our entanglement is denied.

Within the educational context of networked learning, this has significant impact for as Bigum and Rowan (2004) argue “how we frame this work matters. As the performance grooves or patterns are laid down and are repeated, they provide a kind of template or limit to what can come next” (p. 223).

Law (2004) provides a suggestion for how to counter what may come next, saying,

When we attend to practice, we are also led to issues of reflexivity. In particular we need to ask whether we are able and willing to recognise that our methods also craft our realities? (p.153)

In attending to practice and to paths laid down, it becomes too easy to dismiss realities with which we are unfamiliar. The following figure provides for a telling of this short paper as experienced by my laptop’s mouse using Iographic software (software freely available at iographica.com)

My capacity to make meaning out of this Iographic representation is no better or worse than had the representation been written in binary code or Arabic. However, I can appreciate that the representation need not be considered trivial, or lesser, for being in a format that is not academic prose. The Iographic tells an alternate story, a story that I can only assume attends to different activities than those I perceive as important, and where (re)presentation is such that an alternate reality might be glimpsed. In this particular telling the actor whose story is told happens to be more technological than otherwise. The story might, however, also have been

otherwise. A decentered approach to networked learning provides possibilities for attending to those who otherwise might not be heard.

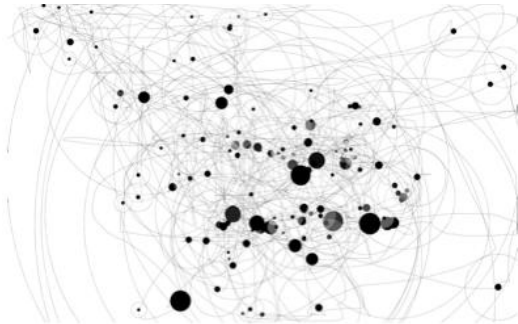


Figure 1. Iographic representation attending to the work of the laptop mouse in writing this paper.

Discussion

In the three movements above, the question posed by Haraway has been usefully demonstrated in bringing forward the value of questioning what it is to be human and how such knowledge might better inform networked learning. The first movement setting out posthumanism as a very ordinary state raised awareness for our being made in association. In the second movement, the learning and teaching relationship is brought into the foreground. In the scenario described, technology is clearly an actor of influence. Not only is this manifest when the Internet is “broken” with a major connectivity fail, but it is also noteworthy that in the example pointed to there is no agreement on the reality presented. In the third movement, the focus shifts to what is to be done. Attention is then drawn to design for networked learning. Rather than accepting a position describing technologies as mediating our learning and teaching, a method for considering relational dynamics is emphasised.

Implications

This paper posits we are already, very ordinarily, posthuman. Taking a posthuman stance does not require seeing oneself as exotic, alien, or requiring any newly acquired or evolving sense of some superior or advanced being. We need not wait on the arrival of some oddity. Accepting that we have always been posthuman there is an opening to see ourselves as relationally constructed. In accepting the second movement, an exploration of the dynamics of such relating is made possible. In the third movement, exploring practices as they are done, we might then consider the politics of our relating, of realities known and of realities that might be glimpsed. In taking an experimental and creative approach to how voice of various actors might be considered, there is potential then for other stories to also be told, and perhaps for quieter participants within networked learning opportunities to have their realities attended to.

References

- Bigum, C., & Rowan, L. (2004). Flexible learning in teaching education: Myths, muddles and models. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, 32(3), 213-226. doi: 10.1080/1359866042000295389
- Carvalho, L., & Goodyear, P. (Eds.). (2014). *The architecture of productive learning networks*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Edwards, R. (2010). The end of lifelong learning: A post-human condition? *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 42(1), 5-17.
- Fenwick, T., & Landri, P. (2012). Materialities, textures and pedagogies: socio-material assemblages in education. *Pedagogy, Culture and Society*, 20(1), 1-7. doi: 10.1080/14681366.2012.649421
- Fenwick, T., Edwards, R., & Sawchuk, P. (2011). *Emerging approaches to educational research: Tracing the socio-material*. London: Routledge.
- Flint, H. J., Scott, K. P., Louis, P., & Duncan, S. H. (2012). The role of the gut microbiota in nutrition and health. *Nature Reviews; Gastroenterology and Hepatology*, 9, 577-589.
- Franklin, U. (1999). *The real world of technology* (Revised ed.). Toronto, Canada: House of Anansi Press.
- Latour, B. (1993). *We have never been modern* (C. Porter, Trans.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

- Law, J. (2004). *After method. Mess in social science research*. Abingdon, England: Routledge.
- Ray, K. (2012). Gut microbiota: married to our gut microbiota. *Nature Reviews; Gastroenterology and Hepatology*, 9, 555. doi: 10.1038/nrgastro.2012.165
- Snaza, N., Applebaum, P., Bayne, S., Carlson, D., Morris, M., Rotas, N., . . . Weaver, J. (2014). Toward a posthumanist education. *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, 30(2), 39-55.
- Wenner, M. (2007, November 30). Humans carry more bacterial cells than human ones. *Scientific American*. Retrieved October 18, 2015, from <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/strange-but-true-humans-carry-more-bacterial-cells-than-human-ones>
- Kearsley, G. (2004). Explorations in Learning & Instruction: The Theory Into Practice Database. <http://www.gwu.edu/~tip/> [viewed 14 Jun 2004].
- O'Shea, T. & Self, J.A. (1983). Learning and teaching with computers. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall Inc.
- Underwood, J. (1997). Breaking the cycle of ignorance: Information technology and the professional development of teachers. In D. Passey & B. Samways (Eds.), *Information Technology: Supporting change through teacher education*. (pp.155–158). London: Chapman & Hall.

Sincere thanks are extended to the anonymous reviewers who reviewed an earlier rendition of this paper.