Scholarship on the Move – 5 (Twittering Computers and Writing 2009) by James P. Purdy and Joyce R. Walker

 This Prezi is one of six by James P. Purdy and Joyce R. Walker for “Scholarship on the Move,” a piece in The New Work of Composing, forthcoming by Utah State University Press and Computers and Composition Digital Press (http://ccdigitalpress.org/).

Twitter

Computers & Writing Keynote, 2009

In our analysis of the #cw09 posts, we are particularly interested in a set of posts that occurred during the keynote speech by Barbara Ganley.

see Note 1: Note 1: Vincent Rhodes has posted a public research presentation (using Prezi: http://prezi.com/hps74o\_0rdw2/ ) called “Moderation or Presentation: Using Twitter backchannel and Actor Network Theory for more Effective Conference Engagement,” in which he outlines and discusses the use of Twitter in this specific location and the kind of conversation it might be said to represent. Other bloggers, Denniz Jerz (http://jerz.setonhill.edu/weblog/) and Steve Krause (http://stevendkrause.com/2009/06/24/cw09-and-when-i-saw-the-pointpowerdanger-of-twitter-and-other-computers-and-writing-highlights/ ), have also posted entries about the session.

Link to external prezi: <http://prezi.com/hps74o_0rdw2/>

At the beginning of her presentation (also using Prezi: http://prezi.com/owkpisogt74s/ ), Ganley asked the audience to consider the term “ecotones” and invited participants to use Twitter to discuss their understanding of the term.

Link to external prezi: <http://prezi.com/owkpisogt74s/>

Twitter posts then continued throughout her talk. During the speech, there was considerable disconnect between Ganley and her audience, summarized by Steven Krause’s later blog post, in which he remarks,

“there was something about her delivery that made it seem like she was scolding us, which was weird because she was scolding us for [not doing] stuff most of [the] people [who attend C&W] already do” (www.stevendkrause.com, "#cw09 and when I saw the point/power/danger of Twitter," June 24, 2009).

The tone of the talk was critiqued also by Michael Day, who posted in Twitter stream during the presentation, mentioning,

“The keynote speaker is interesting and engaging, but she’s singing to the choir. Has she read any of our work?”

Later in that thread, Michael Day also posted, “…as someone said,

“Teachers are the hardest audiences…particularly when we feel that the work we’ve already done has been ignored.”

Critical Dialogue

Perhaps in part because of this perception that Ganley had not taken the time to familiarize herself with scholarship in the field, the tweeters were fairly critical of various aspects of the talk, arguing back via the backchannel about Ganley’s assumptions and some of the specific points that she made. For example, the following post takes issue with Ganley’s representation of storytelling as an activity that makes students feel safe about writing:

“[I] disagree that writing is safe or that stories build communities in only safe ways. Stories also restrict and even destroy community" (Jrwalker).

Argumentative Production

In this way, the posts related to this specific event became, in a sense, an argumentative production. But instead of containing a linear argument that stated, supported, and rebutted, the Twitter stream was a “messy text,” one that developed through explicit responses to Ganley and in ongoing dialogic responses to ongoing posts. Indeed, like email discussion groups, the genre itself is designed to promote, even require dialogue in an instantaneous way that is much more immediate than the more temporally distant kinds of dialogue produced by most print-based scholarly productions. What we might term “micro-arguments” were embedded within this dialogue as it evolved.

As we mentioned in the analysis of the Techrhet discussion group, arguments in these locations are explicitly not designed for depth-of-analysis. However, the entire discussion, read and absorbed by the participants in that network, and later partially archived and posted to the Techrhet discussion group, did produce a set of rather coherent assertions. For example, the posts developed in some detail a discussion of the fact that it was Ganley’s tone, rather than her content, that was off-putting to the audience. A sub-assertion/rebuttal was made by “lesliemb” to the effect that Ganley may have been deliberately provoking this response from her audience:

“I suspect @bgblogging is playing the provacateur a bit. I think it's a good keynote... It's spurring plenty of chatter.”

Speculation & Association

The same type of interactivity was critical to the examples of speculation and association we found in this Twitter stream. Juxtaposition and jumps in topical focus are continuous as posts are quickly updated. Contributors move from quoting the talk directly, to posting observations about their reactions, to posting counter-arguments to others' posts. They also asked speculative questions about both the topic of Ganley’s speech and the evolving discussion of Twitter as a medium of exchange. For example, in response to both Ganley’s comment on the importance of storytelling and others’ critique of her use of storytelling as a kind of metaphor for freedom, one poster asks,

“is storytelling a metaphor? storytelling relies on a timeline--does this make us tied to a temporal rather than spatial organization?" (operabrat8).

In associational moves, posters pasted web URLs and referenced other talks at the conference. A few referenced talks that would occur later at the conference, such as this post, in which an author listed his own talk as one that would address issues that were being considered in the stream:

"Come to my presentation tomorrow to see Brad Henderson and me riff on Ganley's focus on the joy of sharing student-motivated writing!” (Andyojones).

Thus, we found in the Twitter stream that occurred at C&W 2009, the same kind of moves that we analyzed in the other three types of texts we reviewed. Twitter posts share some of the informality and personally-oriented features of discussion group interactions, and the nature of the medium and genre meant that our evidence of large scale or more in-depth aspects of this work were to be found more as a collective experience (both for the participants as in analyzing the stored posts). This type of collective knowledge-making is so very far (in terms of genre expectations) from current assumptions about scholarly knowledge-making that it may be difficult for our readers to accept the possibility that such collective knowledge-making could be a “scholarly-activity” claimed by an individual scholar.

Scholarly Production

It’s true the that a scholar participating in the C&W Twitter stream might have a difficult time listing his or her participation as a scholarly or creative production in an annual tenure and promotion review, even though she or he might point to exactly the same kinds of knowledge-making moves that occur in larger productions.

Ultimately, then, our argument needs to move in the direction of examining how these kinds of interactions lead to and/or facilitate the ongoing production of knowledge. Do they influence the work of others? Do they shape activity in the discipline? Do they contain, as a collective group of exchanges, enough evidence of the various elements of our framework (or perhaps an even better, more comprehensive framework) to justify status as a “scholarly production”?

Collective Experience

In the case of the posts at the C&W conference, it seems fairly clear that they did, at least in terms of how they created a collective experience that added to the scholarship about social networking in academic settings. In addition to blogs and presentations about this topic that have been created in the 6 months since the event, there were several additional conversations on the Techrhet listserv that referred back to the #CW09 hashtag. For example contributors to the “Darkside of the Backchannel” thread specifically cited the conference twitter in their discussion of the value of and potential problems with twitter feeds at conferences:

“The C&W 2009 twitter critique (which was mentioned in Sept of this year on this list I think) may have sent the speaker a message. Or the Web 2.0 speaker discussed above, who seems to have suffered from a similar rhetoric-fail concerning audience. But do we know this for sure?” (Techrhet, Annette Vee, Dec. 6, 2009).

Steve Krause then responds with a citation from Ganley’s blog in which she responds to her performance at the talk:

My experience giving two keynotes recently brought home my struggle to bring something of value back to school: one keynote was playfully interactive and went over well; the other was neither playful nor well-received–all I managed to do in that one was to scold people for not changing their practices enough in spite of whatever obstacles they face. My impatience was not helpful. (Ganley, http://bgblogging.com/2009/07/03/early-july-return-briefly-perhaps/ )

Backchannel Reporting

However, the C&W 2009 Twitter feed, especially the section of it that was in response to Ganley’s talk, was perhaps not typical of blogging at the conference, in that a large number of posters were concentrating on the same talk (while at the concurrent sessions bloggers were spread out over several) and also in that the exchanges were both local (responding to and surrounding the talk) and “meta” in that they exhibited a certain amount of self-awareness about their status as “backchannel,” as in this post by Karl Stolley, in which he muses,

“Funny how the twitter backchatter is an overlapping “ecotone” unto itself.”

As a result of this communal focus and self awareness, the posts during the keynote seem to have a more coherent level of assertion than posts from the rest of the conference, which were often more descriptive in nature. This descriptive activity certainly has value and certainly helps to create a community network and provide information and participation to members of the community that can’t be present physically, but it is not clear to us that this kind of “reporting” could be understood as producing new instances of scholarly knowledge-making.

Scholarly Movement

So it’s possible that, in both Twitter streams and in discussion groups like Techrhet, it would be necessary to show that the productions not only include some of the critical moves and evidence of scholarly knowledge production, but that they illustrate that the ongoing dialogue produced an impact on the participants or on other readers, or that the texts have a trajectory that extends beyond the immediate exchange to impact the thinking and further scholarly efforts of the community.

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