

# Transforming Learning: Building an Information Scaffold

[Professor Tara Brabazon offers models and examples of the ‘information scaffold’, ensuring that students learn how to not only find information, but to evaluate it.](#)

Students from under-represented groups may require more extensive support or more radical changes in teaching and learning strategies if they are to approach completion rate norms. Thus, HEIs need to consider both the support and the teaching and learning cultures and strategies they offer to students from disadvantaged backgrounds, rather than merely concentrating upon the application and entrance process ... a priority should be to find ways of ensuring more students succeed in completing their course and qualification rather than intensifying the marketing effort to expand recruitment.

Geoff Pugh, Gwen Coates and Nick Adnett, 2005, p.33)

// **The gift of innovative research is that it can shock, shatter and change attitudes and behaviour. Geoff Pugh, Gwen Coates and Nick Adnett's study of widening participation in the British education system offered a single and profound truth: too much attention is spent on institutional marketing and 'access' and not enough time and commitment is granted to motivation and the information scaffold that builds 'teaching and learning cultures.'** The parallel development of managerialization in universities and an enthusiasm for 'new' – rather than effective – technology has ensured that phrases like generic competencies, mission statements, strategic plans, learning outcomes and assessment philosophies have sucked the meaning, complexity and passion from curriculum design and development. Widening the participation – rather than access – to further and higher education to women, citizens of colour, mature aged scholars and students who are the first in their family to enrol in post-compulsory education requires

**the creation of careful and reflexive curricula that is assessed by criteria beyond reified 'subject benchmarks' and 'quality assurance.'**

My goal in this short paper is to offer productive and positive alternatives and solutions to the managerial switchblades impaling our classrooms and curricula. Instead of assuming that 'technology' can solve educational 'problems,' attention is placed on 'more extensive support' through curriculum, assessment and literacy. The goal is to integrate an information system into a social system, to develop learning cultures and the strategies through which they can be developed and nurtured, even in difficult times. The continuities and alliances between the analogue and digital, past and present, build relationships between media and offer curricula options for building an information scaffold.

**A question of context**

How do we ensure that our assumptions about reading, research, writing and the movement from information to knowledge are made explicit to our

From: S  
Sent: Wed 23/01/2008 05:58  
To: Brabazon Tara  
Subject: Re: Can someone disconnect that woman's email???: LM164

Hello Tara!! Hope your well!!??  
Am really looking forward to the next module thinking pop. I have loved doing creative industries with you, last semester and you have made a huge difference to me, and how i see things and even feel about myself in that short space of time. Monday mornings have become cool! Just thought you should know! Are the readers still gonna be ready to collect next monday? I think i can go for it a bit more this module and that i have more to give.

Take care  
S xxxxxxxx

students? One imperative is to return the passion, energy, motivation and commitment to education and our students.

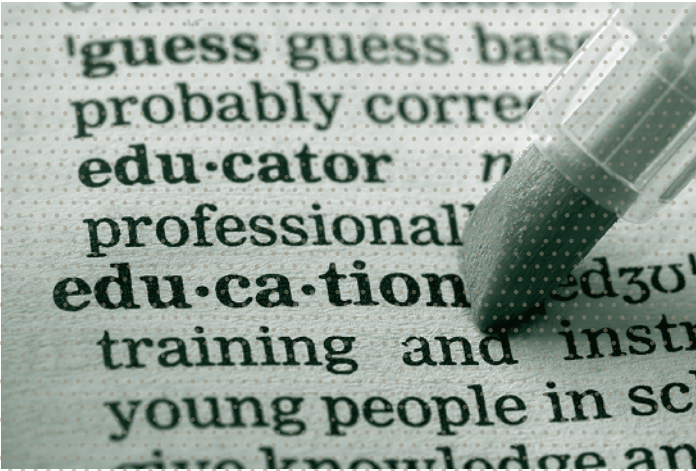
S's email confirms enjoyment in education, but also the self-reflection that 'i have more to give.' It is this attitude teachers need to harness and encourage. A goal for the humanities and social sciences is to create better citizens, to facilitate the development of creative, provocative and passionate thinkers who challenge those around them to do better and be better. Only by diagnosing and interpreting our new classrooms can informed pedagogical and policy decisions emerge. Yet as modernity is shaken through the deglobalizing world crises of war, terrorism and 'natural' catastrophe, education must assume another function, beyond 'giving' civilization and culture, beyond maintaining a market economy. In a time of such change and turmoil, the views of John Tiffin become even more inexplicable.

Academics answer the same questions that students ask generation after generation. What if artificial intelligence could take care of these questions? You don't get a good education if you're part of a 1:20 ratio rather than 1:10 – and student numbers are rocketing (2004, p.22).

Students are not asking the same questions, because the identity of students attending universities in the last ten years – let alone generation after generation - has changed. Mature aged students shape scholarship distinctly from those who have just left school. The role and proportion of international scholars has also increased. Students deserve better than generic answers to specific and individual questions. If the problem is staff and student ratios, then that issue should be addressed directly and not masked by 'gee wizz' technological 'solutions' of 'artificial' intelligence.

Digitization has shaped conceptualizations of literacy and widened the meanings and flexibilities of text. Cal Durrant and Bill Green have confirmed that the fluidity of textual movement has initiated new definitions of literacy. Operational literacy – which focuses on students as code breakers – now extends beyond print to the dynamic interchange between word, sound and image. Cultural literacy, which recognizes a reader as a competent participant or user of a textual environment, also incorporates the ability to move text into other settings and genres, through cutting and pasting. Critical literacy, or the capacity to analyze text, is far more difficult to confirm or monitor in an internet-mediated environment (Durrant and Green, 1998). Because 'use' of digitized information refers to the movement of text between documents, there is an awkward conflation between finding, reading and interpreting material. Without questioning why particular technological platforms are incorporated into education, literacies are being lost.

“Students are not asking the same questions, because the identity of students attending universities in the last ten years...has changed.”



From: P  
Sent: Sat 19/01/2008 13:36  
To: tara  
Subject: INFORMATION TECONOLOGY IS????? !!! ( someI can say Eurisko)

hellò

I am a student in Computer scince.

I think u have take a big blunder.

Social library , ontologies, Rdf - shema , metadata, are the new way for Add Knowledge in the world, and all pep. in the world MUSTTT!!!! SAY: MUST ; have possibility to interract with all knowledge that Internet have.

Teacher.. think about your student , they are minds ... someI can change our word give them the possibilty!!!

CAUSE NOW WEB IS 2.0!!!

This seamless passage/confusion between finding and using information is one explanation of why plagiarism is a major problem in digitized educational settings, and why Web 2.0 rhetoric is becoming ideologically tangled in neoliberalism, anarcho-syndicalism, right and left wing libertarianism and democratic participation.

In such a context, it is necessary to focus time and attention on the building of an information scaffold, to orient students into the world of the text, so that they are able to evaluate Google searches – and websites generally – by moving outside of the digital environment and into other media. To reach this goal, Mary Macken-Horarik recommends teaching strategies that facilitate “explicitness” (1998, p.82). The aim of this process is to give students – and citizens – the ability to move texts into diverse contexts, and observe how meanings change. Explicitness in method is required to establish an “enacted curriculum” (Wyatt-Smith, 1999, p.29-35), rather than constructing (another) list of assessment criteria unread by students.

There will never be a single way to teach literacy. The diversity of learners means that learning is a fragile process (Rohl and Rivalland, 2002, p.33). In such an environment, finding and implementing emancipatory education is difficult. It is particularly difficult to balance the imperatives and initiatives of quality education (1) with democratic teaching and learning. When adding discussions of literacy to such a project, the political debates encircling education are vitriolic and damaging. Terry Threadgold described literacy “as a governmental technology for controlling and organizing populations” (1997, p.367). Critical literacy remains an intervention, signaling more than decoding a text or compliant reading. The aim is to create cycles of reflection. Operational literacy – encoding and decoding - is a cultural practice of reproduction. Critical literacy requires the production of argument, interpretation, critique and analysis.>>

Building an information scaffold

One of the best disguised escapes from anxiety is the escape into information.

Hugh Mackay (1993, p.226)

After surveying literacy theories for insight and assistance, I realized that there is a mismatch between my expectations of research and scholarship and what my students assume is university-level work. I presupposed that operational literacy would inevitably lead to cultural and critical literacy. Instead, Google facilitates a quick and simple ‘method’ for completing student assignments, inferring that they can answer complex questions about Gramscian hegemony or Stanley Aronowitz’s postwork theory as easily as finding their old school friends. I decided to state my expectations in formal course materials, facilitating ‘explicitness.’ The desire for an ‘enacted curriculum’ required that I change the assessment to determine their ability to find diverse sources and interpret them. It was important that I commenced this process at first year level.

The first time I attempted to embed and assess an information scaffold in my curricula was successful. At that time, my strategy was prescriptive, rather than flexible. In 2002, I wrote the curriculum for a course titled *Repetitive Beat Generation*. It was an upper-level undergraduate course, small in numbers and competitive in entry requirements. Before writing a research essay, students were required to submit an annotated bibliography.

Annotated Bibliography

There are strict requirements on this component of the exercise. Students must include at least thirty sources. Each source is accompanied by a 20-50 word description, showing how they are to be used in the project.

Of these thirty sources,

- At least twelve must be refereed articles and books, split evenly between the two categories. Students must therefore learn how to use databases, such as the expanded academic database. Come and see Tara – she will show you how these operate. Please note: these books and articles **must be** non-fiction.
- There must be at least five references from popular music.
- There must be at least one film or television programme.
- There must be at least five web sites.
- There must be at least two magazine or newspaper articles.
- There must be at least two novels or collections of short stories.

This is obviously a difficult exercise, but it is important for students to increase their research capabilities, and develop analytical skills in a wide array of media.(2)

The results from this highly regulatory assessment were innovative, considered and balanced. The essays derived from this bibliographic exercise were of the highest standard I have seen. Most of the students in the group went on to postgraduate work. Although I was unaware of it at the time, I

created a scaffold for learning which slowed the research process, creating time for reflection and planning.

Two years later, in my upper level course, *Cultural Difference and Diversity*, I attempted this process again for honours candidates, which in the Australian system is a selective, competitive and optional fourth year of study.

2. Essay Outline and Annotated Bibliography (10%)

Length: 1500 words (a combined and maximum limit for the two parts)  
Due date: Monday, 19 April 2004

This assessment is aimed at helping students develop their main essay. The assignment has two parts.

(A) Essay Outline

A topic for the main essay must be presented, alongside both a clearly crafted question and thesis statement. Ensure that you present the structure of the paper. Also, display what you believe will be the strengths and problems you may confront in researching this paper.

(B) Annotated Bibliography

Present at least 10 references, with a short description of how these sources will contribute to your paper.

This assignment worked extremely well and the feedback from students was excellent. They found that the project crystallized their main essay and confirmed the research material available to them. The task for me was to then translate these earlier successes – in a specialist and competitive upper-level undergraduate course and honours programme – into a first year mode of assessment.

The form of this assessment, when tempered by the directives of critical literacy theory, was overt and clear, with assumptions unmasked. The following assignment reveals how I enacted and revealed my expectations to students.

1. Essay Justification and Annotated Bibliography

This assignment prepares students for writing their main essay. Students are free to choose the topic of this paper, but it must sit within the following model.

The form of the question will read –

Evaluate the relationship between text, readership and politics in \_\_\_\_\_

Students may fill in the gap with a site of their choice. Here are some options to start you thinking about your own interests.

- Evaluate the relationship between text, readership and politics in David Beckham.



- Evaluate the relationship between text, readership and politics in Nike footwear.
- Evaluate the relationship between text, readership and politics in Bob Marley’s hair.
- Evaluate the relationship between text, readership and politics in James Bond’s dinner suit.
- Evaluate the relationship between text, readership and politics in a University tutorial.

Students are only limited in choice by their own imagination.

Please note: It is expected that students will use between 10 and 20 sources from the course reader to write the main essay. This level of research and scholarship is non-negotiable, and must be visible in the bibliography of the submitted main essay.

This first assignment prepares you for the writing of this important main assignment. You must do the following.

STAGE ONE

Present your chosen question, justifying your choice and identifying any problems – in terms of material, interpretation or argument – that you foresee. Outline who will be the primary theorists you will use and the major argument of the essay – the point you are trying to prove. This section will be between 400-600 words in length.

STAGE TWO

Students will use between 10 and 20 sources from the Reader for the Main Essay. Therefore this second stage for your first assignment focuses on students finding sources OUTSIDE THE READER. Students are required to locate TEN FURTHER SOURCES and write between 20 and 40 words on each source, explaining their relevance to the project. This explanatory paragraph creates an ‘annotated bibliography,’ rather than simply ‘bibliography.’

The ten sources must be of the following type.

- Two scholarly monographs. (Please note: a monograph is a book. Ensure that the text is produced by a recognized scholarly publisher, such as a University Press.)
- Two print-based refereed articles. (Refereeing is the process whereby a journal sends out an article to scholars in the field to assess if it is of international quality and rigour. Students know that articles are refereed because on the inside cover of the journals an editorial board is listed and the process of review outlined. Examples include the *Cultural Studies Review*, *The International Journal of Cultural Studies* and *Cultural Studies*.)
- One web-based refereed article. (Students must ensure that the site they use – such as *M/C* or *First Monday* – is a refereed online journal.)
- One web-site that is non-refereed (that is an online article from publications such as *Online Opinion*, a blog or fan club site). >>





- One magazine or newspaper article.
- One track or album of popular music.
- One advertisement (from radio, television, magazines or the online environment).
- One television programme or film.

The aim of this exercise is to teach students how to find information and assess its relevance for a project. Once completed, this material becomes the further reading for the main assignment. At that stage, students simply intertwine these sources with the set course reading. Your research for the main essay is done!

Please do not be worried about this assignment. Tara is happy to help in any way, explaining the nature of information and source material. Do not hesitate: come and see her – or email her – with any queries.

**The word length for both parts of this project is a combined maximum of 1000 words.**

This assignment did address the problems that have worried me in the last few years. Expectations about reading and research were revealed, and unspoken assumptions about University education were presented. For those students without this knowledge about finding research material, I constructed an information scaffold so that they knew what was required, and if they did not, then they must ask.

This process aimed to make students think about the quality of information and how it is structured. It slowed their research process. The second part of this assignment enabled the development of critical literacy by asking why sources were chosen, and what they offered to the project. Attention was placed on theories of knowledge and how they were built on mechanisms of classifying, organizing and storing information. The broader lesson students learnt was that while there is an abundance of information, what is scarce is the right information in an appropriate time and place.

Through this type of considered assessment, student users approach web searching with thought and consideration. Before entering Google.com, there are a series of questions for them to ask. I know to ask these questions. I must - overtly and clearly - ensure that students understand why they must probe and frame all information and sources they discover.

1. Who authored the information?
2. What expertise does the writer have to comment?
3. What evidence is used? Are there citations in the piece?
4. What genre is the document: journalism, academic paper, blog, polemic?
5. Is the site/document/report funded by an institution?

6. What argument is being made?
7. When was the text produced?
8. Why did this information emerge at this point in history?
9. Who is the audience for this information?
10. What is not being discussed and what are the political consequences of that absence?

Asking students to answer these questions is a way to limit the free range of searching on the internet and the unquestioning acceptance of the Google ranking. They must pause, reflect and think. These questions create a recognition that finding information is not synonymous with understanding information.

The difficulty - made worse in Web 2.0 rhetoric - is the ideology that information intrinsically builds democracy and intrinsically is empowering. Without such critical pauses in the space between information and knowledge, built through an information scaffold, the inclusion of the internet into the school and university curriculum may ensure access to information, but it does not promote the development of high quality writing, wide reading and innovative interpretations.

Once the level and scale of reading and research is improved, the calibre of writing and drafting is my next target on the information scaffold. The two assessments that I ask students to complete in my other first year course *Thinking Pop* include their own version of George Orwell's essay 'Why I write.' They also must write a book proposal to an imaginary publisher, showing competing titles and shaping expertise in a particular area within a formal publishing environment.

**1. Why I write**  
Due Date: 8am Friday March 14, 2008  
Weighting: 40%  
Length: 2000 words

You are being asked to offer your contemporary version of George Orwell's famous 1940 essay 'Why I write.' Please follow the following instructions.

1. Read Orwell's 'Why I write,' along with the other supplied materials about reading, writing and publishing.
2. Write your own version of 'Why I write.' Ensure that module materials are referenced in your piece.

After the post-compulsory school years, there are too many assumptions that students can manage and coordinate multiple literacies, from oral

"It is too convenient, as education systems around the world are starved of funding and scholars and teachers are dismissed as relics from an earlier age, to argue that experts are everywhere and supposedly everyone is online."

**2. Book Proposal**  
Due Date: 8am Friday May 23, 2008  
Weighting: 50%  
Length: 2,500-4000 words

Students must prepare a book proposal for submission to an (imaginary) publisher **Pop Futures**. They must use the template provided in the Reader as a basis for their work, yet provide an innovative proposal that convinces the Commissioning Editor of Pop Futures. She is a staunch and demanding editor, by the name of Tara Brabazon. Be afraid.

The headings for students to deploy include **book title, rationale, table of contents, brief synopsis of each chapter, word length, proposed delivery date, illustrations, target readerships, competing titles, biographical and contact details of the author**. (Please note: in your Reader, there is a template to follow for this exercise).

Your aim is to demonstrate that you not only know the field of your chosen popular cultural topic, but that you understand the competing books in the area. You must construct a convincing argument for an editor who will determine the quality of your proposal and give you a contract - or not - on the basis of writing.

conversations to reading advanced theory, writing analytical prose, referencing, interpreting diagrams and working through a diverse sonic and visual palette. It is too convenient, as education systems around the world are starved of funding and scholars and teachers are dismissed as relics of an earlier age, to argue that experts are everywhere and everyone supposedly is online. Curriculum development is pivotal to building the scaffold between potential and actual learning, and scholarly disappointment and motivated learning. Until we enter Curriculum 2.0, Web 2.0 will remain a haven for bloggers, libertarians and conspiracy theorists but be of less use to teachers and students with a commitment to widening participation. Much more attention is required on user generated **contexts**, rather than user generated **content**.

**Endnotes**  
(1) I particularly wish to note the diverse meanings of quality in an environment of auditing and regulation. Please refer to Jouni Kekale (2002, p.65-80).

(2) This course was taught with Steve Redhead, using his book - *Repetitive Beat Generation* (2000) - as the springboard.

**Note on contributor**  
**Tara Brabazon** is Professor of Media Studies at the University of Brighton and Director of the Popular Culture Collective. She teaches from first year through to doctoral level, and is the leader of the Master of Arts Creative Media. Tara has written nine books, with her most recent monographs being *The University of Google* and *The Revolution Will Not Be Downloaded*. •

**Contact info**  
Media Studies, University of Brighton, United Kingdom,  
t.m.brabazon@brighton.ac.uk  
www.brabazon.net

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