VIDEO VORTEX
Reader
RESPONSES TO YOUTUBE

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WHY NOT (TO) TEACH ON YOUTUBE [1]

ALEXANDRA JUHASZ

I decided to teach a course about YouTube to better understand this massive media/cultural phenomenon, given that I had been studiously ignoring it (even as I recognised its significance) because every time I went there, I was seriously underwhelmed by what I saw: interchangeable, bite-sized, formulaic videos referring either to popular culture or personal pain/pleasure. I called them video *slogans*: pithy, precise, rousing calls to action or consumption, or action as consumption. I was certain, however, that there must be video, in this vast sea, that would satisfy even my lofty standards, and figured my students (given their greater facility with a life-on-line) knew better than I how to navigate the site.

I decided that I primarily wanted the course to consider how Web 2.0 (in this case, YouTube) is radically altering the conditions of learning (what, where, when and how we have access to information). Given that college students are rarely asked to consider the meta-questions of how they learn, on top of what they learn, I thought it would be pedagogically useful for the form of the course to mirror YouTube's structures, like its amateur-led pedagogy. Thus, Learning From YouTube was my first truly 'student-led course: we would determine the central themes and relevant methods together. Now, on YouTube there is a great deal of user control, but this is actually within a limited and also highly limiting set of tools. So, I remained the professor, taking roll, grading, and setting forth the rule that all the learning for the course had to be on as well as about YouTube. So, all assignments had to be produced as YouTube comments or videos, all research had to be conducted within its pages, and all classes were taped and put on to YouTube. While these constraints were clearly artificial, and perhaps misleading about how YouTube is used in connection with a host of other media platforms that complement its functionality, it did allow us to become critically aware of how its architecture constrained our atypical goal (for the site) of higher education.

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1. This essay consolidates my blogs about a pedagogic experiment, Learning from YouTube, a
    Media Studies course I taught about and also *on* YouTube in Fall 2007 [www.youtube.com/
    mediapraxisme]. Part of the experiment was to be as digital as possible: as a class and also as
    a scholar. Blogging about the class continued many of its aims: to make digital and thenrethink
    traditional forms of academic writing, expertise, medium, and audience within higher educa-
    tion. This explains the non-academic tone and style of this particular effort. Furthermore, my
    blogged endeavors linked to the hundreds of videos we produced during the course, so that
    my arguments were expanded and enriched by the sounds, images, and words of my students.
    This paper version pales in comparison, thus allowing us to also learn Why Not (to) Write about
    YouTube (off-line). You can find the multi-mediated versions of my ruminations at: www.aljean.
    wordpress.com; www.henryjenkins.org/2008/02/learning_from_youtube_an_inter.html; www.
    oculture.com/2008/04/teaching_on_youtube.html

Meanwhile, my on-and-about gimmick, plus a press release, were sexy enough to catch the eye of the media, mainstream and otherwise, allowing for the next exhausting, but self-reflexive lesson: this, in the role and value of media attention within both social networking and education. For the most part, the students found that TV cameras in the classroom were intrusive without being revealing, and the journalists' analyses were frustratingly rudimentary and biased (they all began from the assumption that the class, like YouTube, was a joke). The students, while initially awed, quickly came to feel abused, judged, and harassed by a global spotlight that saw them without equal attempts at listening or understanding. In the meantime, I was overextended, responding to multiple media queries each day, all the while gathering hits and attention, but without a quality or depth of dialogue, making the extra labour expended on the course seem little worth the bother. Within the first two weeks, we had encountered simple lessons in YouTube: on the significance of brevity, depth, fame, and communal values for this system, and how different these qualities typically function for advanced learning. Beyond this, students quickly understood how well trained they are to do academic work with the word – their expertise – and how poor is their media-production literacy (there were no media production skills required for the course, as there are not on YouTube). It is hard to get a paper into 500 characters, and translating it into 10 minutes of video demands real skills in the artful summary into word, image, sound, and their layering. So, also within the first few weeks, students were already agitating to go off YouTube and do their school work in the regular way (we eventually did go off for their final projects). However, by mid-term, most students had devised methods to do their academic assignments in video. I would briefly characterise these styles of work as: word-reliant, the illustrated summary, and the YouTube hack, where academic content is wedged into a standard YouTube vernacular form (music video, How To, or advertisement).

Also by mid-term, we could effectively articulate what the site was not doing for us. Our main criticisms came around four structural limitations: communication, community, research, and idea-building. We found the site to be inexcusably poor at:

- Allowing for lengthy, linked, synchronous conversation using the written word outside the degenerated standards of on-line exchange where slurs, phrases, and inanities stand-in for dialogue.
- Creating possibilities for communal exchange and interaction (note the extremely limited functionality of YouTube's group pages [www.youtube.com/groups/learningfromyoutube], where we tried our best to organize our class work), including the ability to maintain and experience communally permanent maps of viewing experiences.
- Finding pertinent materials: the paucity of its search function, currently managed by users who create the tags used for searching, means it is difficult to find what you want in the impressive holdings of the site. For YouTube to work for academic learning, it needs some highly trained archivists and librarians to systematically sort, name, and index its materials.
- Linking video, and ideas, so that concepts, communities and conversation can grow. It is a hallmark of the academic experience to carefully study, cite, and incrementally build an argument. This is impossible on YouTube.

Given that the site is owned by Google, a skilled and wealthy corporation, and that all these functionalities are easily accessible on other Web 2.0 applications, we were forced to ask: why do they *not* want us to do these things on YouTube? This is how we deduced that the site is primarily organised around and most effective at the entertainment of the individual. As YouTube delivers fast, fun, videos that are easy to understand and easy to get, it also efficiently delivers hungry eyeballs to advertisers. It need provide no other services. In fact, expanded functionality would serve to get in the way of the quick, fluid movement from video to video and page to page that defines YouTube viewing, besting older models of eyeball-delivery. YouTube is not made for higher education, nor should it be. However, given that students spend more and more time in the visual culture it produces, their expectations about knowledge delivery, and moving images, begin to be envisaged through its structures of entertainment. Thinking through education on YouTube, after teaching this class, I found that YouTube, and some of the features more generally of Web 2.0, served to dramatically unsettle this education/entertainment binary – as well as six others – that typically structure the academic classroom. As these rigid binaries are dismantled, the nature of teaching and learning shifts (I'd say for the worse). I'd like to briefly name and explain the troubles with these dismantling binaries here.

Public/Private

The elite liberal arts classroom (the setting where I teach, Pitzer College, costs about USD 40,000/year), usually (or at least ideally) depends upon an intimate and 'safe' gathering of high-paying, and carefully selected students, to create a communal pedagogy. In my typical classroom, once the doors are closed, students are asked to publicly contribute their interpretations, and sometimes personal experience or knowledge, always knowing that they are not experts, but are certainly experts-in-training. The steady construction of a confidence of voice, particularly in relaying a complex analysis, is one of the 'services' we professors hope to provide. Students, often feeling vulnerable in the critical eyes of their classmates and their esteemed professor, are challenged to add their voices to the building dialogue, one in which they are an active, continuing member. Ever aware of the power dynamics that structure the classroom – allowing some to speak with ease and others not – I engage in strategies to improve the 'safety' of the space.

Needless to say, these lofty dynamics begin to radically shift when anyone and everyone can see and also participate. During Learning from YouTube, students were routinely judged by critical YouTubers who we would never see or know, who may or may not have been aware of the history of our conversations, or the subtle dynamics in the room. While access grew, the disciplining structures in place in a closed classroom (attendance, grading, community responsibility) could not be applied to our YouTube participants. So they were unruly, unpolite, and often unproductive: not disciplined into being as committed and attentive as were we. Then, in response, it was stunning for me to see the strength of the students' desires to re-establish the privacy of the classroom: they tried to figure all kinds of walls between the class and the greater YouTube community. This, only the first example of their profound need to bring discipline to a class (and space) where I had given much of it away, as does Web 2.0 more generally. Of course, this raises the question: in what circumstances do we find discipline pleasurable or at least necessary, and at what cost do we let it go in certain arena of social interaction? This question is particularly unsettling for

me, a professor committed to 'critical pedagogy', where a significant amount of the power disparities in the classroom are re-thought and undone. Here I was in an experiment in letting control go, and the effect was to want it back.

Aural/Visual

The capacity to express ideas through words is almost entirely closed down on YouTube where both the 500 character limit, and the sandlot culture of web-expression, produces a dumbing-down when using writing that is more or less impossible to improve upon. The place to speak and be heard on YouTube is through video: which easily links language with sounds and images. However, most newly empowered videomakers on YouTube are not educated or adept in the language of images, and thus depend upon the mere recording and relay of their words, primarily through the talking-head or rant of the vlog. On my class YouTube page [2] I created several 'tours' of the course output, to create some control of the multitude of videos we had created over the semester. [3] In my Tour #4, 'The Vernacular, Visual and the Vlog', I propose that there are two dominant forms of video on YouTube: the vlog, characterised by its poor quality and vox populi, and the corporate video, easily identifiable because it is all the vlog is not: high quality production values referring to corporate culture.

'Bad' videos are made by regular people, using low-end technology, paying little attention to form or aesthetics while carefully attending to the daily life, feelings, and thoughts of the maker. They are typically unedited, word or spectacle reliant, and accrue value through the pathos, talent, or humour of the individual. Meanwhile, professional content on YouTube abounds. 'Corporate' videos look good – like mainstream media – because they are made by professionals, are stolen from TV, or are re-cut movies. They express ideas about the products of mainstream culture, in the music-driven, quickly-edited, glossy, slogan-like vernacular of music videos, commercials, and comix. They consolidate ideas into icons; meaning is lost to feeling. Vlogs depend upon the intimate communication of the spoken word. Corporate videos are driven by strong images, sounds, and sentiments. This underscores how YouTube is not the level or uniform playing field people want to pretend it to be. By reifying the distinctions between the amateur and the professional, the personal and the social, in both form and content, YouTube currently maintains (not democratises) operating distinctions about who owns culture. A people's forum but not a revolution, YouTube video manifests the deep hold of corporate culture on our psyches, re-establishing that we are most at home as consumers (even when we are producers).

Body/Digital

Teaching and learning depend upon bodily presence: the forceful, dynamic, inspiring performance of the teacher, the alert attention and participation of the student. While in a typical classroom this may not function in the ideal sense – the professor can be uninspiring or uninspired and the students may be there in body but not in mind – the YouTube classroom diminishes this further, evaporating the powers of eye contact and professorial censure (no-

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2.   YouTube, www.youtube.com/mediapraxisme
3.   These are available in their unstructured glory on the class group page: www.youtube.com/ groups/learningfromyoutube

tice the role of discipline again), as well as the expressions of boredom or enthusiasm writ apparent on the bodies of students. When we attempted on-line classes through YouTube, they simply fizzled and died. Outside the paltry offerings of the site for real-time interaction, there is something in the lived shared exchange that creates an atmosphere for education that is not possible on this site. The body seems a pre-requisite for community (at least as far as the classroom is concerned): a better vessel for cementing obligation, trust, and concern between people than is the computer.

Importantly, the architecture and ownership of YouTube draw users by fuelling their desire for community. While many come to the site to be seen and heard by others, to make friends, they are much better served by the world, or MySpace. For, the very tools and structures for community-building which are hallmarks of Web 2.0 – those which link, gather, index, search, version, allow participation, commenting, and networking – are studiously refused on the site, even as it remains the poster-child of Web 2.0. People go elsewhere for these functions, dragging their favourite YouTube videos behind them to more hospitable platforms (with YouTube's permission). YouTube is a site to upload, store (and move off) videos. And YouTube is a mess: videos are hard to find, easy to misname, and quick to lose. The very paucity of its functions feeds its primary purpose: moving users' eyeballs aimlessly and without direction, scheme, or map, across its unparalleled archive of moving images. The site signals to us in its conscientious failings that it is not a place to hunker down or hang out with others, not a place within which to seriously research or study, not a place for anything but solo digital-play.

User/Owner

The user is told she is free, but this is not the case. Nowhere near it. She makes work in forms that best serve the master's (oops) owner's needs. Her ideas, spoken freely through newly accessible cameras, and on little screens encircled by ads, reflect those that the master taught her: re-cut sit-coms, testimonials from reality TV, fan mash-ups. They move freely across the internet, insulting some along the way, and encrusted by the flames of others the longer they sit still.

The user feels she is free, and so she speaks. But the owner uses other users to censor her as the owner sees fit. The user might be a person, she's often a corporation, but more often yet, she's an individual servicing a corporation. And all of this is done gratis, justifying YouTube's highly celebrated 'democratic' claims. Yet little of this labour works outside the corporate economy (even for non-profits) that does very well by all of this users' work. The owner, well, he has very little to do! The user (slave, oops) does all the work: makes the content; rates it; censors it; watches it; marks that she was there (and gets her hungry restless eyeballs to the ads).

Entertainment/Education

This was the first thing we learned in the class: while it wasn't any good for education, YouTube is killer for entertainment, fun, wasting time. The nature of its successful entertainment is not much different from what audiences loved before it, in fact, it holds media primarily produced within earlier times and formats. What differs most is platform and duration: YouTube as at-home or mobile, viewer-controlled delivery system of delectable media

morsels. But these morsels rely upon, integrate and condense three effective stylistics developed from previous media – humor, spectacle, and self-referentiality – to create a new kind of video organised by ease, plenitude, convenience, and speed (although this does sound most like a TV commercial). The signature YouTube video is easy to get, in both senses of the word: simple to understand – an idea reduced to an icon or gag – while also being painless to get to. Both spectacle and self-referentiality are key to facilitating this staple ease. A visual or aural sensation (crash, breast, celebrity's face, signature beat, extreme talent, pathos) holds the iconic center, or totality, of a video (spectacle), or an already recognisable bite of media performs the same function (through self-referentiality). Understandable in a heartbeat, knowable without thinking, this is media already encrusted with social meaning or feeling. YouTube videos are often about YouTube videos which are most often about popular culture. They steal, parody, mash, and re-work recognisable forms, thus maintaining standard styles and tastes. Thus, humor enters through parody, the play on an already recognisable form, or slap-stick, a category of spectacle. [4]

And what of the 'entertainment' value of millions of unique regular people speaking about their lives, and to each other, in the talking-head close-up of the vlog (the style I use)? While often a statement against corporate media, I would suggest that humour (a definitive self-mocking, ironic tone), spectacle (of authenticity, pathos, or individuality), and self-referentiality (to the vernacular of YouTube) also combine within this YouTube staple to create the foundation of its entertainment value.

All of the entertainment of YouTube builds into a postmodern TV of distraction, where discrete bites of cinema controlled and seen by the discrete eye of one viewer are linked intuitively, randomly, or through systems of popularity, in an endless chain of immediate but forgettable gratification that can only be satisfied by another video. I imagine that this must inevitably lead to two unpleasant, if still entertaining, outcomes: distraction foreclosing action, and surface fun precluding depth. Today's students, schooled on YouTube, iphones, and Wiis, want their information relayed with just such ease and fun: they want their learning pleasurable, simplified, and funny. They don't want to be bored; even as they are always distracted. They want school to speak to them in the language they like and know and deserve. While I'm the first to admit that a good professor makes 'hard' information understandable, this does not mean that I do not expect my students to take pleasure in the rigorous work of understanding it. While I have always been aware that I am a performer, entertaining my students while sneaking in critical theory, avant-garde forms, and radical politics, much of what I perform is the delight and beauty of the complex: the life of the mind, the work of the artist, the experience of the counter-culture. I am not interested in teaching as a re-performing of the dumbing-down of our culture.

4.   Interestingly, spectacle and humour were definitive of early cinema, as well. The development, 100 years ago, of this new medium also spoke across class and continent, in a simplistic visual lingua franca. However, within cinema history, ironic self-referentiality is usually understood to occur within an art-form at its later or last stages.

If YouTube videos, or the site itself, are to be used for anything other than blind and numbing entertainment (and certainly on Niche-Tube – the murky, raucous, underworld of YouTube where videos are made never to be found or seen by any but the lucky or insanely committed – this is happening with some [small] success), it is critical that the language of YouTube develops to include context, history, theory, and community, and by this I mean both within the architecture of the site and the form of the videos themselves. Certainly more people are making and viewing media, access to channels of production and distribution are rapidly growing to an almost incomprehensible scale. However, even the most moving of videos needs to be connected to something (other than another short video) –people, community, ideas, other videos to which it has a coherent link – if it is to create action and knowledge.

Control/Chaos

The college classroom is a disciplined space where knowledge moves in a formal and structured routine familiar to all the players. While the critical classroom begins to alter this script by giving more power to students, and allowing knowledge to be created dynamically, this is not the random chaos of information and power that is YouTube. For effective education, structure remains paramount so as to control conversation, to allow ideas to build in succession permitting things to grow steadily more complex, to be able to find things once and then again. On YouTube, amateurs rule, experts are deflated, and authority is flattened. While it is exciting to hear from new and varied people, and while this undoubtedly widens and opens our knowledge-base, it is difficult to learn in an environment where vying opinions rule, where data is helter-skelter and hard to locate, and where no one can take the lead. Again, the significance of discipline within the academic setting proves the rule. Without it, ideas stay vague and dispersed, there is no system for evaluation, and you can't find things or build upon them.

We are clearly living in a time where conventionalised methods must be re-thought because of the increased functions of the media. Teaching and learning are two conventions that will adapt in the face of Web 2.0. I've been an advocate of critical pedagogy my entire career as a professor. In particular, I have been keen on refiguring power, expertise, and objectivity in the classroom attempting instead to create more collaborative, imaginative pedagogic interactions where there is a self-awareness about how embedded structures of power (race, class, gender, age, expertise) organise classroom participation, and access to learning. That said, while trying to learn through YouTube, there were significant challenges posed to the traditions of teaching that both my students and I experienced as obstacles. We found that just what defined YouTube as good entertainment – its compelling lack of depth and expertise, and it's all but disappeared procedures of coherence, order, and forced attention – made it poor for education.

Of the many surprises and challenges of this class, it was most dumbfounding for me to find how resistant my students were to the loss of discipline, authority, and structure in the classroom. They hated the amount of process this course demanded; disliked that I wouldn't just tell them stuff; were reluctant to do course work in a new format in which they lacked training; and generally wanted me to take control so that they could attend to other things and more clearly understand what they needed to do to satisfy me. Why, we might ask, do they enjoy

the aimlessness and devaluing of authority on YouTube, but still want it in their education, even as any student would say, in a heartbeat, that they wish school was less boring, more fun, more *entertaining*? A rigorous, controlled, contained, rational argument is key to learning; not the flow, but the building of knowledge. Meanwhile, ease of acquisition, while comforting, and perhaps numbing, to my mind can never meet the sheer joy of a challenge, and the prize of the steady, often communal and hard work of creating new knowledge together.

MEDIA MASTERS AND GRASSROOT ART 2.0 ON YOUTUBE

BIRGIT RICHARD [1]

Communication in the Web 2.0 context mainly works through images. The online video platform YouTube uses this form of visual communication and makes art forms of Western societies visible through their online videos. YouTube, as cultural reservoir and visual archive of moving images, accommodates the whole range of visualising creative processes – from artistic finger exercises to fine arts. A general characteristic of YouTube is the publishing of small everyday gestures of the 'big ones' (politicians, stars), like small incidents and their clumsiness in everyday actions, e.g. Beyonce's fall from the stage or Tom Cruise's demonic pro-scientology interview. Through their viral distribution on different platforms, these incidents will never be covered up or disappear from the public view. At the same time big gestures and star images are replicated and sometimes reinterpreted by the 'small people' who present themselves in the poses and attitudes of the stars. Generally, a coexistence of different perspectives is possible. YouTube allows polysemic and polyvalent views on the everyday and media phenomena.

This article relies on YouTube research [2] that started in 2006 at the New Media Department of the Goethe University of Frankfurt. The results of the research have already presented representative forms and basic patterns, that is to say, categories for the clips appearing here. These kinds of clips, recurring in the observation period, have an impact on the basic representation of art or artistic expression within moving images on this platform. Methodologically the focus leads to the investigation (which has to be adequate to the specifics of the medium, or 'media adequate') of new visual structures and forms which can create – consciously or unconsciously – an art form. After focusing on the media structures, it will be discussed whether any and, if so, which 'authentic' new forms were developed solely on YouTube and whether these forms are innovative and can be characterised as avant-garde.

This article first takes a small step in evaluating how to get from a general communication through means of visuality in web 2.0, an often endless chatty cheesy visual noise [3] – to the special quality of a consciously created aesthetic. From where do innovative aesthetic forms

1. This paper was translated with the support of Jan Grünwald and Marcus Recht.
2. *Youtube Favourites: Ego and Art Clips.* Goethe University, Frankfurt 2006.
   See http://www.birgitrichard.de
3. 'Das Internet verkommt zu einem Debattierclub von Anonymen, Ahnungslosen und Denunzianten. Ein Plädoyer für eine Wissensgesellschaft mit Verantwortung', Bernd Graff, 'Die neuen Idiotae: Web 0.0', *Sueddeutsche Online*, September 2007, www.sueddeutsche.de/computer/artikel/211/146869