EDITORIAL

The Politics of Knowledge

Doug Blandy, Senior Editor

On June 24, 2007, Danah Boyd (2007 b), a PhD student in the School of Information at the University of California Berkeley, posted on her blog *apophenia::making connections where none previously existed*, an essay titled “Viewing American Class Divisions through Facebook and MySpace.” This essay circulated rapidly through the blogosphere and was a focus of a report on the *BBC News* (2007), among other mainstream media outlets. On *BBC News* it was described as a “long term research project.” On the day after the essay was posted on her blog, Boyd (2007 a) reported that the essay had received a remarkable 90k hits. On June 27, Boyd posted on her blog, because of the media attention that the essay was receiving, a request that the press not “call my house phone. Do not pester my department. And do *NOT* hound my subletter.” In that same post, because of the criticism the essay was receiving from the academic community, Boyd requested that her essay not be read as a peer-reviewed academic article, but as what might later become a “formal article.” (For Boyd’s synthesis of the comments she received on her essay see her June 27, 2007 post on *apophenia::making connections where none previously existed “woah….omg.reflections on mega-viewership.”)

From the beginning, Boyd did not claim that she was posting an academic article. Embedded in the essay was a disclaimer to this effect. However, the article does include a description of method and a statement by Boyd about the importance of her topic. Boyd’s mixed feelings about the essay are worthy of being quoted in full because they provide insight into the tension that exists around the creation and distribution of knowledge today. She writes,

> Hopefully, one day, I can get the words together to actually write an academic article about this topic, but I felt as though this is too important of an issue to sit on while I find the words. So I wrote it knowing that it would piss many off. The academic side of me feels extremely guilty about this; the activist side of me finds it too critical to go unacknowledged.

For many of those who read and forwarded Boyd’s essay over the Internet, the distinction that she alludes to between an academic article and her essay will be of little consequence. However, within academia this distinction is monumental for its relationship to what is considered
“reliable knowledge” and the methods through which knowledge is conceptualized and communicated.

It is important to attend to the phenomenon Boyd’s essay generated. I agree with Gene Koo (2007), posting on the blog Law School Innovation, that the attention given to the essay is symptomatic of “the culture of Web 2.0 (prototype and release early, build buzz and community, revise revise revise) … butting up against the culture of academic publishing (print what you can prove, peer review, cite sources).” While Boyd’s essay was congruent with the culture of Web 2.0, it was incongruent with the culture of academic publishing. For academics what Boyd seemed to claim to know was suspect. For these readers to accept, and not challenge Boyd’s assertions, would threaten the status quo of acceptable academic publishing.

Conceptions of what constitutes “knowledge,” as well as how one seeks, attains, sustains, and shares it, have not been static over time. Larry Sanger (2007) emphasizes in his essay “Who Says We Know: On the New Politics of Knowledge,” that the means through which knowledge is created and disseminated is political. Sanger describes how at various times religious institutions, government, interest groups, professional organizations, publishers, and the media determine what is known. This is politics as revealed in authority, governance, power, and status and those entities who are privileged to participate and those who are not.

In academia, one of the most obvious ways in which the political environment is revealed is who and what gets published coupled with the status of the publication venue.

Currently the proliferation of weblogs, social networks, virtual environments, wikis, podcasts, rss feeds, and folksonomies—among other digital technologies that facilitate collaboration, open communication, shared resources, and question authority—are changing the conception of knowledge while simultaneously provoking debates within academia around the nature and dissemination of knowledge (For example, see the “Web 2.0 Forum” on Britannica Blog (http://blogs.britannica.com/blog/main/category/web-20-forum/) or “Click and Double-Click 17: Web 2.0 and Academic Publishing” on etc@bmc (http://www.brynmawr.edu/etc/etcblog/2007/06/click-and-double-click-17-web-20-and.html). Looking even farther ahead, Michael Jensen (2007), writing in the Chronicle of Higher Education, speculates on what will constitute authority in a future digital environment where scholars will have access to “hundreds of billions of pages of content” (p. B7). This environment, sometimes referred to as Web 3.0, is one in which personalized artificial intelligences will assist scholars to identify and access pertinent information and resources. Jensen warns that research materials not available in this digital environment may become invisible.
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This is the larger social, cultural, and political context in which Studies in Art Education exists. This is a context radically different from how the creation and distribution of new knowledge was conceptualized at the journal's inception. I believe that the editorial board, the associate editor, and I, and by extension the scholars who contribute manuscripts; the National Art Education Association (NAEA) Board and membership; and the staff at the national office must work together to traverse this rapidly evolving, political and polarized landscape.

Studies in Art Education in its current form is clearly associated with a professional and expert community, the likes of which is currently undergoing transformation. I hesitate to predict the future because such predictions usually turn out to be erroneous. However, I do believe that in the not too distant future Studies in Art Education will accommodate, in some way, the collective and collaborative forms that digital technologies now allow (See the website of the journal College Composition and Communication (CCC) (http://inventio.us/ccc/aboutccc.html) for how one academic journal is beginning to accommodate this environment.). I may be among the last editors who facilitate this publication as it was originally conceived.

Studies in Art Education does embody at least one of the salient characteristics of the Web 2.0/3.0 environment, albeit in hardcopy form. Studies in Art Education is a platform through which we, as users of the journal, are also sharing the content that we create. All of us associated with this journal constitute a network committed to the creation and communication of scholarship that supports arts education for children, youth, and adults. Among the strengths of our network is the number and diversity of formal and informal interest and affiliate groups that have emerged within the NAEA and the research that is associated with them.

I am looking forward to working with the users/creators of Studies in Art Education to consider the ways that we as a field define and determine what constitutes new knowledge as we simultaneously acknowledge the privilege and power that we hold in this regard. That we should do this with the utmost transparency and fairness is a responsibility that the editorial board, the associate editor, and I take very seriously. To this end, at the Studies in Art Education editorial board meeting at the 2007 NAEA Convention Candace Stout (now past editor) and I presented to the editorial board, for their approval, written policies and procedures for the purpose of making as transparent as possible the responsibilities and restrictions placed on positions of the editorial staff. We also affirmed our obligation to present a variety of research methods and content and to provide publishing opportunities for art educators and other professionals. These policies and procedures have been forwarded to the NAEA Board of Directors and are available from me upon request. In
addition, the editorial board agreed that the section of the journal titled “Book Reviews” be been changed to “Media Reviews” in recognition of the myriad ways in which materials relevant to art educators are being published.

My editorship begins with gratitude for the guidance that I received from Candace Stout during my tenure as associate editor. She very carefully prepared me for the responsibilities that I have now assumed. I am also grateful to Kristin Congdon for agreeing to serve as associate editor. I know that our long-standing collaborative working relationship will inform our work with this journal. The editorial board consists of innovative scholars who are making significant contributions to the field. Elizabeth Hoffman, my editorial assistant, has designed and implemented an editorial process that takes greater advantage of digital technology and the web. Finally, I wish to acknowledge Lynn Ezell and Clare Grosgebauer at the NAEA office in Reston for their ongoing assistance with the editorial process. I hope that you, as readers of this journal, will feel free to communicate with those of us associated with the editorial process by e-mail at studies@uoregon.edu

References


Editor’s Note

Thanks to Kristin G. Congdon and Elizabeth Hoffman who commented on an earlier version of this editorial.