

A critical response to Hooley's Seven Cs of digital literacy

Tom Staunton

This article will provide a critical analysis of Tristram Hooley's Seven Cs of digital literacy. This analysis will be based on responses from the theoretical tradition of New Literary Studies (NLS) to digital literacy. The key findings of this article are that NLS points towards the Seven Cs, firstly, developing an autonomous view of knowledge and skills where learning is seen as separate from context and, secondly, which obscures forms of exclusion and inequality. Finally, this analysis will discuss an alternative basis for careers practice based on online pedagogy and critical investigation.



Introduction

There is a growing theme in the career development sector that how career development is enacted and supported is being changed by the advent of the internet. A significant figure in this growing literature is Tristram Hooley. Hooley has been involved in co-writing two important pieces on this subject in the form of 'Careering Through the Web' (Hooley *et al.* 2010) and 'How the internet changed career' (2012) around the time that interest in the internet and career was increasing. This article will focus on Hooley's Seven Cs of Digital Career Literacy (2012). Despite being five years old the Seven Cs has been paid little attention from a critical perspective. This article will aim to provide a critical account of the Seven Cs and by doing so open up avenues for discussing how we understand digital careers enactment and how careers practice equips individuals to respond to the internet.

This article will particularly draw attention to critiques that have been made of the linked concept of digital literacy from the field of New Literary Studies (Lea

and Street, 1998). I will explore how these critiques can be applied to the Seven Cs. The article will explore how these critiques draw attention to how the Seven Cs encourages an individualised view of career, looks at ability as autonomous rather than embedded in context and creates a potentially problematic relationship to power structures.

The Seven Cs of Digital Literacy

Hooley's Seven Cs were first articulated in the article 'How the internet changed career' (2012) and has also featured prominently in a number of subsequent pieces such as Longridge, Hooley and Staunton, (2013), Hooley, Shepherd and Dodd (2015) and Hooley, Bright and Winter (2016). In his original article Hooley (2012) sets out how the internet has reshaped the context within which careers are pursued by individuals and the linked question of 'what skills and knowledge do people need in order to pursue their careers effectively using the internet?' (p.3) Hooley draws attention to four functions of the internet in relation to career development where the internet is described as a career resource library; an opportunity marketplace; a space for the exchange of social capital and a democratic media channel. Hooley states '...all of these functions are underpinned by an individual's digital career literacy and their capacity to take advantage of the opportunities that the internet affords.' (2012, p. 5) He then proceeds to articulate the Seven Cs of digital literacy as describing the underlying competencies individuals need to pursue their careers in a digital age. Hooley lists them as Changing, Critiquing, Communicating, Curating, Collecting, Connecting and Creating.

Hooley draws explicit lines between his work and the concept of digital literacy articulating how the concept,

alongside information literacy and career management skills, forms an underpinning concept for his digital careers literacy. Hooley notes that digital literacy articulates how to act in a digital environment and so digital career literacy is how to '...develop effectively a career in the online context' (p.6). Hooley draws attention to a number of works on digital literacy such as Eshet-Alkalai (2004) and Rosado and Bélisle (2007) which relate to his work. Similarly, although not mentioned by Hooley, it is worth noting the similarity between Belshaw's (2011) 8 Cs and Hooley's Seven Cs. All of this places Hooley's Seven Cs in the tradition of digital literacy frameworks which articulate a number of separated competencies which describe the items needed to operate effectively in a digital environment.

New Literary Studies

The term digital literacy was first coined by Gilster (1997). Since this point digital literacy has been developed into a number of schemas such as Belshaw's (2011) eight competencies and Sharpe and Beetham's (2010) pyramid. Alongside the development of these ideas has been the development of a range of critical responses to digital literacy. One vein of this literature comes in the form of pieces which make use of New Literary Studies (NLS). NLS developed as a critique of the skills agenda in HE in the UK in the late 1990s. Against an agenda which focussed on literacy being based on autonomous competencies which sit above contexts NLS articulated literacy as being found in the personal meaning of literacy acts tied to specific social and cultural contexts (Gourlay and Oliver, 2014).

A number of recent works, such as Gourlay and Oliver (2014), Lankshear and Knobel (2006) and Sefton-Green, Nixon and Erstad (2009) have drawn attention to how digital literacy tends to describe literacy in the same autonomous terms which the skills agenda employed and make use of NLS to respond to this. Though these arguments do not relate directly to the field of careers I will use an examination of these ideas to critique Hooley's Seven Cs and propose new directions for careers theory and practice in relation to these perspectives.

There are two sets of ideas I will look at. Firstly, that digital literacy takes on an autonomous view of literacy.

Street (2003) noted the danger of seeing literacy as devoid of social contexts, that it can be delivered 'autonomously' with wider social contexts being an afterthought. Literacy, for Street, always occurred in a context. Gourlay and Oliver (2014) note Belshaw's (2011) use of metaphorical elements in his scheme, which they see as implying that Belshaw sees literacies like substances that are clearly delineated from each other and which have an essential core that is not affected by context. Similarly Lankshear and Knobel (2006) note that digital literacy is often seen as an 'it' or a 'thing'. They go on to state that

"Digital literacy" consists in so many lists of abstracted skills and techniques that a proficient person can "do". Once they "have" these "skills" they can use them purposefully [in a variety of contexts] (p. 16)

They describe how digital literacy is seen to have 'causal efficacy' which can 'generate outcomes in the world' (p. 15). They are careful to note that this is not to say that skills are not a part of literacy. Instead they argue that to see skills as the only part, especially in a way that sees them as an element which is constant irrespective of context, is to hold a misguided view of how people generate outcomes in the world.

This brings us onto the second of the critiques, as we mentioned earlier, that NLS employs, that digital literacy ignores the socially constructed nature of literacy. To take Lankshear and Knobel's phrase that digital literacy claims that people can 'generate outcomes in the world' (2006, p. 15) it ignores that what outcomes are worth generating are socially constructed rather than objectively established. NLS argues that while these outcomes may appear objective and common sense in their nature they in fact involve notions of exclusion and inequality. Street states that central to NLS is '...asking "whose literacies" are dominant and whose are marginalized or resistant'. (2003, p. 77). This comes out of the claim that by terming something or someone literate you make something or someone else illiterate. Because of the dichotomous nature of this way of thinking it is vital to expose 'whose literacies' are we considering? Who is determining what literacy is and to what end? Similarly Sefton-Green *et al.* (2009) state;

We argue that the term “digital literacy” incorporates more notions of exclusion and division than is commonly supposed and that it exposes the contradictory politics of literary education in new and provocative ways. (p. 108)

Sefton-Green *et al.* (2009) go on to discuss how print literacy was initially yoked to the emergence of middle classes and the needs of industrial society. Similarly, they argue, digital literacy is linked to the economic needs of the information age and what is required for individuals to compete for employment and to become consumers.

Gourlay and Oliver (2014) make very similar points when critiquing Belshaw (2011) and by extension other taxonomic forms of digital literacy. They note how Belshaw’s digital literacy ‘...is reminiscent of rather aspirational neoliberal “graduate attributes” and is ‘...an ideological wish-list that positions a student as a particular kind of subject’ but does not position the individual as meaning making agent. They conclude by noting that digital literacy ‘support[s] an underlying ideology of the graduate as a quality-assured “product”’. (2014, p. 147).

Under this analysis when we ask Street’s (2003) question ‘whose literacies’, we see digital literacies are the literacies of neoliberalism, graduate recruitment and ‘marketised education’ (Molesworth *et al.* 2010, Brown and Carasso 2013). This is far from the common sense and objective nature that the autonomous model of literacy I discussed above implies. Rather than being the non-contextualised ‘elements’ that we might think them to be, under this analysis digital literacies are linked to a very specific agenda which does not attempt to incorporate the student as a meaning maker in their own right.

Critically Analysing the Seven Cs

I have drawn attention to two main critiques that authors have made of digital literacy using NLS. In this section I will explore how the same ideas could be applied to Hooley’s Seven Cs. I will consider these under the headings of autonomy, community and power structures.

Autonomy

As I have noted before the Seven Cs explicitly builds on digital literacy as a concept. This includes adopting the same taxonomic structure as others, such as Belshaw (2011). The Seven Cs is presented in its own version of an autonomous model, with Hooley describing digital literacy as involving particular ‘knowledge, skills and attitudes’ (2012, p. 5) The delimitation of its Seven aspects into ‘elemental’ units is further emphasised in Longridge, Hooley and Staunton (2013) who conclude by noting that the aspects of digital careers literacy could be translated into independent learning outcomes. The underpinning implication of the framework is that any individual, in any online context pursuing any career, can improve their prospects through developing the seven competencies. Furthermore there is an implication in the above piece that the core skills are developed as part of formal education and certified before someone starts using them (as is normally the pattern in formal education).¹ We have to ask if digital practice is embedded in individuals informal worlds whether we can expect it to be significantly transformed by looking at it ‘from afar’ through formal education. Lankshear and Knobel (2006) make an interesting comment on this noting;

Courses are created to teach learners these tools/techniques/skills, and certify them when they are finished. (This logic is almost the exact reverse of what young people do when they set about learning how to play an online game and become part of an online gaming community.)
(p. 16)

I would assume that ‘the exact reverse’ referred to here is to gain mastery before starting practising as opposed to starting practising and so developing mastery through practice. In an autonomous model, where skills are seen as decontextualized, the temptation will be to create a learning experience that is similarly devoid of context in order that skills can be properly assessed and certified.

¹ In Hooley, T., Shepherd, C. and Dodd, V. (2015) the authors do discuss how the Seven Cs could be used in a more informal manner across the lifespan so this is not an aspect that is hardwired into the Seven Cs but more a feature of how it is often produced.

Community

As well as its taxonomic nature we also see the Seven Cs holding a particular approach to context and especially to social relationships. On first analysis Hooley mentions context in a number of ways, such as saying the Seven Cs are rooted in the contexts of career and the digital world (Hooley 2012) and that the Seven Cs operates in a social context of 'social process' based around the importance of 'social and professional networks' (Longridge, Hooley and Staunton 2013, p. 5). But in this we see that the Seven Cs has a tendency to describe how individuals can fit into the digital world and how they can use it effectively for their career. This sees individuals as separate from their environments and able, through the right techniques, to gain mastery over them. This analysis echoes McCash's (2006) analysis of Law and Watts (1977) DOTS model of careers education where McCash draws attention to DOTS view of individuals standing above environment in a manner which promotes individualism and self-interest. It is important to see that though the Seven Cs discusses a variety of ways of interacting with others it still maintains an individualistic stance towards other people. This develops a view of others in line with Horkheimer's (1974) instrumental rationality where other people are reduced to their usefulness; or to Adorno's (1974) description of young aspiring workers who Adorno describes as possessing no relationship or connections that are not viewed as 'of use' to an individual's career. This view of career can be seen as being in contrast to McCash's (2006) who described careers as unavoidable social projects or to how Hooley (2015) has elsewhere discussed career as a communal project shared by individuals. This critique can be applied to most other employability based approaches to career (see Frayne 2015) but it is important to notice the Seven Cs relation to this type of conception.

Power Structures

As I noted before a key feature of NLS is that literacy incorporates elements of exclusion inside it (Street 2003, Sefton-Green *et al.* 2009). By defining something as literate you make something else illiterate. So how does this play itself out in the Seven Cs (Hooley 2012)?

Digital career literacy is concerned with the ability to use the online environment, to search, to make contacts, to get questions answered and to build a positive professional reputation. (p.5)

The Seven Cs of digital career literacy is a framework which describes the skills, attributes and knowledge required to effectively use the online environment to build a career.

(Longridge, Hooley and Staunton 2013, p.9)

Both of these quotations reveal a focus on individuals being effective and professional, themes which are developed throughout the literature on the Seven Cs. This echoes Buchannan's (2017) argument that employability leads to a situation where individuals' digital lives are increasingly subsumed into a professional identity. Similarly this echoes Gourlay and Oliver's (2014) analysis that digital literacy privileges the formation of an aspirational neoliberal subject who is a 'quality assured' product. This ends up positioning the individual as being responsible for fitting into wider social structures. This can be problematic. Firstly, as McCash (2006) describes, this type of approach ends up making the individual responsible for their own actions. Buchannan (2017) directly links the formation of individual responsibility as a key tenet of a neoliberal society. This in turn can obscure wider structures that may limit an individual's activity. As I have argued elsewhere (Staunton 2016), we could see the internet as a contested space where power structures and vested interests limit the ability of individuals to participate. Secondly, this type of thinking can end up inducting individuals into a neoliberal viewpoint where they are encouraged to assume that being effective and professional are simply common sense ways of operating in the world. McCash (2006) points out that individuals come to careers education with evolving political views and that careers education should encourage the development and testing of their views rather than presenting one view of career as orthodox. In these terms there is a danger that the Seven Cs can end up reifying neoliberalism.

In conclusion NLS, alongside other critical perspectives, has allowed us to explore the Seven Cs as involving a limited pedagogy based around autonomy, encouraging an individualistic instrumentality and upholding neoliberalism against

other ways of understanding the political nature of career.

Alternative Practice

From our analysis so far I am going to construct three different principles that could be used to describe what an alternative approach to digital career development might be, in light of our analysis of the Seven Cs:

1. An inductive approach to the internet
2. A communal approach
3. A critical approach

Firstly then, an alternative approach should be inductive. This is to say it should be drawn out of how people actually experience the internet. This follows on from Lankshear and Knobel's (2006) comment about how people learn to play video games or use online communities. This description focusses on how people develop their use of technology through experience and personal experimentation. I do not want to say that this means that there is no place for formal learning but there should be a greater interaction between formal and informal learning and between individual's time in the classroom and online. A helpful starting point for this is the developing pedagogical tradition of connectivism (Staunton 2016, 2017). Connectivist courses aim to embed individuals in an online community where the course focusses around social-learning strategies and peer-to-peer support to develop appropriate pedagogical strategies (Stacey 2013). To put this another way features of the online world, such as digital content and peer-to-peer support, should be a significant part of pedagogy. Connectivism also tends to prioritise students developing their own views and solutions to problems over a prescriptive approach to education. So rather than asking how can the internet support career, a course could be set up to explore the relationship between the internet and career and this could be delivered, in part, using online features. This is not to make an argument of offline versus online as a delivery method but that direct experience of phenomena (in this case the internet) should form a significant building block of pedagogy in this context. This direct experience gives a space for individuals generating their own practice rather than defining what it should be in advance.

Secondly, an alternative approach should be centred around community. Part of heeding NLS's belief that literacies are developed in context is to pay attention to the social situations of students. Their existing digital worlds should be recognised as part of the context of how a scheme of careers education is delivered. Digital careers education should be contextualised, a thought that very much links with the idea of connectivism discussed above. Some of Hooley's writing around social justice provides a helpful perspective on how to move forward on this. Citing the importance of Freire (2005), Hooley writes;

[Freire] argues for the centrality of context and highlights the possibility of transforming this context. Again we can restate the essence of this method as, notice people's experience, locate it historically and contextually, offer personal resources to manage life as it is, encourage the development of collective solutions and the transformation of oppressive structures.

(2015, p. 2)

This method leans on the importance of locating education inside an individual's context and bring people together to create collective solutions. This initially may seem abstract as to what this means for digital career literacy but a starting point is to say that we should move away from practice which sees the internet as a resource for individuals to make use of for their own ends and see it firstly as a place which can enable groups of people to come together to create solutions to the problems they face. So the site of education becomes both the students' online relationships with their classmates and their wider digital community.

Finally, a new approach should involve critical exploration. If we look again at Hooley's work above (2015) one of the key tasks that people do together is locating their experiences in a historical and contextual relationship. This sees career as a social project, connected to broader social structures and open to critical investigation. It is not merely about how individuals progress or achieve meaningful outcomes though this may be a branch of what investigating career in this manner achieves. A key aspect of this is that debate about how the internet and career fit together should be central to careers

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education. This echoes McCash's (2006) call that careers education should engage with debates around what career is or it risks becoming 'an emasculated version of career development that is shorn of controversy and intellectual complexity' (p. 435). This can be a counter to the concern NLS raises about forms of literacy which induct people into becoming neoliberal agents without their knowledge as it creates debates around the nature of career and how it relates to wider socio-political structures.

To bring this together in a simple statement about an alternative way to approach educating people about how the internet interact with their career would involve practice which:

- 1) Makes use of online pedagogy
- 2) Is focussed on contextual approaches to pedagogy
- 3) Takes a stance of critical investigation towards the relationship between career and the internet

Conclusion

In conclusion I have explored how Hooley's Seven Cs ties itself to the wider agenda of digital literacy. I have explored how NLS highlights how this approach leans on an autonomous model of education and creates hidden exclusions. In light of this analysis I have drawn attention to what alternative practice could look like, practice which makes use of online pedagogy, is focussed on social approaches to pedagogy and takes a stance of critical investigation to the relationship between career and the internet.



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For correspondence

Tom Staunton,
Lecturer in Career Development, University of Derby
t.staunton@derby.ac.uk

Tom also writes a blog about careers education and theory at <https://runninginaforest.wordpress.com/> and is active on twitter (@tomstaunton84) and on LinkedIn.