



**Journal of  
Interactive Media  
in Education**

JIME <http://jime.open.ac.uk/2013/06>

## **Book review: Review of Martin Weller's 'The Digital Scholar: How Technology is Transforming Scholarly Practice'**

Reviewed by Robert Farrow

**The Open University  
(March, 2013)**

Publication details

**'The Digital Scholar: How Technology is Transforming Scholarly Practice'**

**by Martin J. Weller**

**Basingstoke, Bloomsbury Academic, 2011, 208 pages, ISBN 978-1849666176**

### **Review**

This is a book that describes change and the issues that change can provoke. Martin Weller is Professor of Educational Technology at The Open University, and as such is well placed to comment on recent transformations that many have observed in academic life as digital technologies become more prevalent and more education is delivered online.

Weller loosely defines the digital scholar as "someone who employs digital, networked and open approaches to demonstrate specialism in a particular field" (4). The definition of digital scholarship being worked with emphasizes inclusiveness and is intended to encompass both professional academics and those without institutional affiliation. Since all of us now use digital technologies, it is the 'networked' and 'open' aspects of this description that are most interesting.

Digital technologies enable networking, though not always in ways that are anticipated by designers or educators. In fact, Weller argues, it is often the unintended use of "cheap, fast and out-of-control technologies" (10) that is enabling the greatest change as communities form around particular interests or activities. Weller connects this with openness as a feature of web technologies but also with changes that are happening in academia such as the open access movement or the open education movement (23). In the course of his discussion, Weller makes a fairly convincing case for digital scholarship as a field of opportunities rather than threats. Academics, he argues, should be wary of being overcautious since wider social adoption of new technologies always tends to precede their adoption in higher education - by which time new technologies have already come to take their place. In order to ensure that we teach

students skills that will be relevant to their lives we need to remain ahead of the curve (26-27) and understand the wider changes in the media ecology (30).

Perhaps less convincingly, Weller wants to fuse these three aspects (digital, open, networked) together with a particular vision of openness in education where each necessitates the others. "Digital scholarship," he writes, "is more than just using information technologies to research, teach and collaborate; it also includes embracing the open values, ideology and potential of technologies [to] benefit both the academy and society" (50). Given that even those who are steeped in the open education movement often disagree about the nature of openness - or which kind of strategies should be employed in pursuit of greater openness - this formulation might seem somewhat personal.

The extent to which the changes brought about by new technologies should be embraced by academics is a question running throughout the book. The volume is organised into four main sections across fourteen chapters. The first three chapters examine the broader social contexts for changes in educational practice with particular attention paid to new technologies and their treatment in the literature. Chapter Four presents Boyer's (1990) model of scholarly function recast from the perspective of digital scholarship. Boyer's four functions - discovery, integration, application and teaching - each have a chapter dedicated to their discussion. Chapters Nine to Twelve focus in on the impact of behaviour change on a range of aspects of academia including open education, networking, career development and publication. The final two chapters are more reflective, articulating concerns surrounding the future preponderance of digital forms of scholarship and strategies for dealing with attendant anxieties. It is the re-appropriation of Boyer that provides the core of Weller's contribution, and provides the main framework through which continuity and change are examined.

In the section on discovery, Weller finds that the uptake of new technologies among researchers is typically somewhat cautious, largely because of the way that researchers train to do their work in established ways. Research ends up being unusual because "new entrants are encouraged to be conservative while the reinterpretation of practice and exploration is left to established practitioners" (53). However, as early career researchers are likely to be more technologically savvy this effectively works against innovation. However, Weller suggests, digital technologies are increasingly finding a place in the research cycle as well as providing new sources of data (such as open repositories, or Twitter networks/hashtags) and analysis (e.g. data visualization).

The chapter on integration looks at ways in which connections might be made across disciplinary boundaries. Weller argues that blogs may provide the most effective mechanism for disseminating interdisciplinary knowledge while social networks provide routes into different communities and networks (64-71). Aside from the notion that we should generally strive to facilitate communication and share information, the connection between these technologies and the problems of interdisciplinarity are not explored in detail.

Chapter Seven construes 'application' as a kind of engagement between the academic and the public, which respects the fact that there is more to the application of knowledge than teaching. By thinking more closely about our workflow and the ways in which we share the products of our labour as scholars, Weller contends, "much of what we currently aim to achieve through specific public engagement projects can be realised by producing digital artefacts as a by-product of typical scholarly activity" (84).

The final section which develops Boyer's model (teaching) is one that will perhaps be of interest to the widest audience. Weller uses an analogy with the

music industry to argue that 'going digital' leads to an abundance that undermines established models that are based on scarcity. Just as the music industry had to adapt to the decline of physical sales, so education must change in light of the fact that traditional pedagogies were based on limited access to textbooks, lesson plans, multimedia content and other resources. As Weller puts it, "we are witnessing a fundamental change in the production of knowledge and our relation to content" (94). A number of different pedagogies for the modern age - including resource-based learning; problem-based learning; constructivism; connectivism and communities of practice - are considered, although Weller stops short of endorsing any one in particular.

Arguably this text as a whole and the vision of digital scholarship propounded is in places somewhat idiosyncratic; it is a portrait of a particular kind of digital scholar. Although it is a useful record of the kinds of technologies found useful by the author, how easily others might follow the same path is unclear. This is not to suggest, however, that the book is presented as a kind of plan. It is repeatedly emphasized that the value of digital technologies for academic or scholarly use is largely a matter of how well they can be put to work for the individual as part of a personal learning environment. The plan is ... make your own plan! But for readers who are lacking confidence or don't know where to begin with social networks or microblogging some more succinct guidance may be welcome. Weller makes the suggestion that "a well-respected digital scholar may well be someone who has no institutional affiliation" (4). But this is perhaps to underplay the importance of institutional affiliation (whether academic or not) for building online presence and establishing credibility. Not everyone - in fact, relatively few people - can easily draw on a social network or 'lazyweb' to try and find answers to their questions. Without a significant number of followers on Twitter, for example, it's quite possible to broadcast questions without receiving answers in return. Again, there are issues of recognition here: a professor at The Open University is someone with whom those interested in digital scholarship are likely to want to connect because they are aware of the latest developments in area like these and spend much of their professional time assessing the pedagogical and technical effectiveness of different approaches.

The book might therefore have concluded with a clearer summary of Weller's position or tips for engaging with open, digital scholarship. As it is, many of the strategic approaches to becoming a digital scholar are embedded in the discussion of the text when more casual readers might have preferred to have this presented as a clear and distinct section of the text.

Some idiosyncrasies may be in some part related to the fact that the book was written through Weller's blog (<http://nogoodreason.typepad.co.uk/>) and therefore connected to a particular set of Web 2.0 networks and associated communities (2). The process of composition reflects the fact that Weller's commitment to digital scholarship is more than just theoretical and, the author enacts his commitment to openness through the dual publication of the volume as both traditional book and as an online edition which is available for free under a Creative Commons license. [1]

Although an obvious advocate for this kind of innovation in scholarly activity, Weller might have done more to critically examine the potential downsides of the changes that are taking place within academia and society more widely construed. For instance, the potentially isolating effect of substituting physically-close collegiate relationships within academia for digital communities - a fear regularly mentioned in connection with rising tuition costs - is not discussed at length. There is relatively little discussion of the impact of publicity on research, and the possibility that working out ideas 'in the open' might prove to be a barrier rather than an opportunity in some cases. Similarly, the

fragmentary and dispersed nature of online dissemination might be thought to present issues to academics who are keen to closely control the perception of their work and their professional identity. The implications for recognition and attribution of scholarly work tend to be recognised rather than answered, and the issues raised by greater engagement with 'grey' literature or online content are often treated lightly in favour of discussing the opportunities made possible by technological innovation.

None of this really undermines Weller's basic contentions, however, and as a comprehensive description of the changes taking place in academia the book is very successful. Weller never glosses over difficult questions, always managing to acknowledge the complexity of the issues while retaining an accessible tone.

The success of this book, then, is in setting out certain topography and a set of questions that are provoked by the changes taking place in how we communicate. Another strength of the volume is the way in which it assesses the impact of digital scholarship across all areas of academia, demonstrating nuanced awareness of the far-reaching implications of change to existing models of scholarship and to the academy. The crucial thing - as Weller points out - is to ensure that we avoid "a schism opening up between those who embrace new approaches and those who reject them, with a resultant entrenchment to extremes on both sides" (63) of the digital divide.

## References

Boyer, E. L. (1990). *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate*. Special Report for The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

---

[1] [http://www.bloomsburyacademic.com/view/DigitalScholar\\_9781849666275/book-ba-9781849666275.xml](http://www.bloomsburyacademic.com/view/DigitalScholar_9781849666275/book-ba-9781849666275.xml)