

Jing Wang on the MIT Controversy over “Visualizing Cultures”

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In early May after the MIT controversy on Visualizing Cultures broke out, I came across Prof. Wah Cheng's post on H-ASIA below--

- >speaking only for myself, the fact that these materials were presented in a course or
- >course-like environment within a university is context enough.
- >Any reasonable person would, I hope, agree that Dower and Miyagawa cannot
- >possibly anticipate how their materials are used or interpreted outside the
- >context they provided.

This post calls for a critical response that many of those involved in the MIT controversy and those who are reporting from the US mainstream media (including The Chronicle of Higher Education) are unwilling to tackle with.

No, nobody can possibly anticipate what kind of reactions we might receive if we post our teaching materials as open content on the Web that anybody can access from any parts of the world. The 'context' within which Visualizing Cultures worked--before it was pulled down--was a context specifically designed for the physical classroom in the American Academy. It was not a context designed for the consumption of global audiences who carry different ideological, national, ethnic, and cultural baggage, and more important, audiences whose historical memories and national identities are constructed differently.

The problem was: The materials used in an American, physical classroom did not perfectly suit the digital medium that transmit them toward global audiences. It is thus urgent and necessary to reinsert this current debate back into the context of the open content movement. My original commentary highlighted the important role the Internet played in making this unfortunate incident what it was. I think a year from now, our memories about who was right/who was wrong in this controversy may fade, but this incident will definitely be remembered as one of the first instances that challenged the mission of MIT's OCW (OpenCourseWare). It is worth looking into because it signaled an important moment in the yet-to-be unfolded vision for the Digital Humanities in the 21st century.

John and Shigeru's course is part of MIT's OCW--course materials posted on the Web. The ambition behind OCW at MIT is: building the digital commons" by promoting digital teaching and digital learning across national borders. But is it possible for us to develop digital open content that is *accessible* ("no academic jargons please") and *acceptable* to all?

To elaborate this point, I'll quote myself from an exchange I had with a professor in another institution two days ago:

"The one thing that John Dower and Shigeru Miyagawa did not see was that teaching those materials in the classroom (with professors' guidance) is not the same as posting them on the ****home page**** of MIT expecting the global public to learn on their own in the virtual space. Misunderstandings inevitably occurred. That was exactly what I hope all of us would address during this debate--the implications of digital learning in a space that we as professors cannot control, monitor, or guide. The most interesting question for me about this controversy is thus about media and audience in the digital era. This incident showed that MIT's OCW was ill prepared to tackle (this kind of challenge)."

I thus respectfully disagree with what Prof. Cheng said in his post, "materials presented in a course or course-like environment within a university is context enough." OCW is first and foremost a virtual classroom enabled by the digital media. Contextualization is never enough. Furthermore, web surfing and digital media in itself enables and encourages decontextualization. We click on a link, linger there for less than a few minutes and move on to the next link. With every click, we risk taking pictures and words out of context.

This is a scenario that OCW and its major architects never anticipated when they made the vision. And as far as content is concerned, materials that have to do with history, culture, society, and many other subjects that humanists and social scientists teach, if posted online for global consumption, are bound to generate controversies because no two audiences are alike. To complicate things, the digital media allows each and every single individual not only to transmit information instantaneously (as the Chinese students did) but also to talk back to us and protest just as fast. It takes tremendous amount of courage to tackle this challenge head on. Upholding academic freedom tells only half of the story about the relaunch of Visualizing Cultures. The other half is about the creators' enthusiasm with and courage in incorporating the feedback from the protesters.

Last, I would like to throw open a question. The Internet is the modern version of the printing press (which had led to the dissemination of knowledge from the privileged class to the common man/woman). How do we, authorities of academic knowledge, cope with the increasing democratization of knowledge dissemination and knowledge production? Wikipedia is an obvious example. Please take note that John and Shigeru are adding a feature on the site that allows open dialogues and debates.

Will they not receive any negative emails from then on? Of course they will. Nothing posted online can please everybody. The real question seems to me: How do we set up some ground rules for collaborative forms of knowledge production (between academic intellectuals and the international public) to take place in the digital era?

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