Book Review: Claim Your Own Domain – And Own Your Online Presence

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ABSTRACT

Watters, A. (2016). *Claim Your Own Domain – And Own Your Online Presence*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press

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Audrey Watters describes herself as a "serial-dropout" (in terms of education experiences), but as a self professed "folklorist" she has spent the past few years telling the stories about edtech that perhaps the edtech supporters don't always want to hear.

If you have ever heard her talk, then you will already be aware of her criticisms relating to educational technology and this book is very much an extension of those critical observations. At less than 60 pages, this is not so much a book, but is described as a 'essay' and harks back to the 1960s and 70s when Penguin published a set of "provocative essays meant to articulate an acute dissatisfaction with the function of schools" (Will Richardson's Preface [as cited in Watters, 2016]).

This book is fundamentally about three things:

1. Data – broadening our understanding of what we mean by the term 'data'.
2. Storage – where to keep this data so that it is safe, future-proof and accessible.
3. Ownership – clarification over who owns the data collected and how we ensure access to the data owner.

The key message within this book relates to the ownership and use of digital data, particularly that of the learners. Watters refers back to her own childhood where all of her outputs were collated in a manila envelope by her mother. The ownership model was very clear, what she had produced as a learner she had taken home and her mother had kept it. In a digitally motivated world, where is the ownership of student 'data' being considered? Watters observes "there is no digital manila envelope" (Watter, 2016, p. 3) and that if we were to develop one what would it look like?

She is critical of the ownership models of data, lambasting the VLE/LMS as being institutionally owned and critical of Coursera as collecting data on their students' activity but it not being available for those students to take away with them. This book is about how we ensure that students are able to 'claim' their own data and keep them in an online space of their own for perpetuity.

Watters also clearly indicates that she feels it is the educators' responsibility to help students understand how their data is collected and used. In essence she sees a need for students to claim their own data and take ownership of it.

She draws upon the work of the 'Indie Web' movement as an example of a web ownership model and observes how this community sees that the *open* web has become the *corporate* web, controlled by "powerful monopolies" (Watter, 2016, p. 37) and that it should be 'reclaimed' by the individuals. A specific example given by Watters is the 'Domain of One's Own' at the University of Mary Washington, where staff and students are offered the opportunity to own their own domain, and take it with them when they leave.

Morally and ethically it is indeed right that we are transparent about data collection, ownership and use, but this book asks us to go beyond that. It asks us to take back the web, to own our little piece of it and to manage the data about us and within it. This is in stark contrast to the current prolific web model. Taking Facebook as an example – have you really read those terms and conditions? Do you really understand who owns the data they gather? Do you care? Watters not only insists that you should care, you should also seek to take back your own data and look after it in your own space.

Biography

Simon Thomson is Head of Digital Pedagogy at Leeds Beckett University. His work focuses on open education and digital learning. In 2014 Simon was awarded an HEA National Teaching Fellow and is a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy. He can be contacted via Twitter: @digisim.