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Teaching the Posthuman

Universitätsverlag
WINTER
Heidelberg

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation
in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie;
detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet
über <http://dnb.d-nb.de> abrufbar.

Herausgeber:

Prof. Dr. Gabriele Linke
PD Dr. Holger Rossow
Prof. Dr. Merle Tönnies

ISBN 978-3-8253-6991-0
ISSN 0344-8266

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© 2019 Universitätsverlag Winter GmbH Heidelberg
Imprimé en Allemagne · Printed in Germany
Druck: Memminger MedienCentrum, 87700 Memmingen
Gedruckt auf umweltfreundlichem, chlorfrei gebleichtem
und alterungsbeständigem Papier

Den Verlag erreichen Sie im Internet unter:
www.winter-verlag.de

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Stefan Herbrechter

What Makes Us Human? Teaching Posthumanism in Secondary School

Posthumanist Education – Taking up the Challenge

In a recent article (Herbrechter 2018; based on Herbrechter 2014), I argue that, from a theoretical and policy point of view, a truly post-humanist education would have to deal with the following *double imperative*:

One cannot help but think that it might be our inveterate humanist reflexes themselves that have led us into the current situation, and that it could be precisely the concealed, posthumanist, potential of an entirely other form of reason, hiding behind the dynamics of new media technology, that we need to do justice to if we want to even begin to tackle the entirely new breed and dimension that future crises may have. Herein lies, in my opinion, the urgency of the posthumanist challenge to rethinking education – namely, in developing a new impartiality outside anthropocentrism, wary of our most strongly and invisibly ingrained humanist reflexes. (Herbrechter 2018, 742-743)

An obvious way in which I was challenged over these claims was: what would this actually mean for teaching and learning *practice*? How would it work in schools, never mind universities? So the following is meant both as a reply to these voices as well as an attempt to prove to myself and others that some form of posthumanism can actually be *taught*, or at least, it shows what would have to happen and what would be at stake for schools as institutions if posthumanism were to properly and consciously enter them.

What follows is a description and analysis of a 10-hour blog-based teaching unit entitled "What Makes Us Human?" carried out with a class of Year 10 (i.e., 15 to 16-year-old) students of English as a foreign language (EFL) at a German secondary school. The class blog can be

viewed at <<https://whatmakesushuman.edublogs.org>>, while the associated individual student blogs are private and will have to remain so for reasons of personal data protection. This very distinction between public and private and the protection of data produced by 'minors' are themselves of course increasingly being undermined by the intrinsic logic of social media like blogs. They are also questionable from a posthumanist point of view in the sense that the private/public distinction maps onto the individual/social opposition, which, in turn, props up the modern idea of the liberal humanist subject. However, present institutional guidelines in Germany are the way they are, which means that this teaching unit had to bracket some of these more radical challenges and instead had to focus on blogging in a 'safe' environment. In this contribution, I will therefore be focusing on the rationale for such an admittedly 'controlled' teaching experiment by discussing some of the methodological questions and evaluating the outcome and further implications for theory and practice.

Context and Rationale

Within the German federal curriculum and given existing content and subject classification, this teaching unit probably falls within the bracket of 'cultural studies' or 'media studies' in the broadest sense, i.e. *Kulturwissenschaft* and *Medienwissenschaft*, although neither of these is actually a recognised subject or discipline at secondary school level. They are subsumed within the established subject discipline of English (media and (inter)cultural competence are prominent learning objectives in EFL). Cultural and media studies have recently turned towards questions that increasingly challenge the dominant, namely anthropological, concept of culture (i.e. Raymond Williams's famous definition of "culture as a way of life," cf. Williams 2013 [1961], *passim*). This development has been taking place in the context of the so-called "nonhuman turn" (see Grusin 2016): a turning to and re-evaluation of non-human actors (cf. the emergence of theoretical approaches and disciplines like (critical) animal studies, actor-network theory, new (feminist) materialism, and object-oriented-ontology). This theoretical/ philosophical turn towards what has been termed the 'posthuman' or 'nonhuman,' and within which my own work on *critical*

posthumanism has also intervened (cf. Herbrechter 2009 and 2013), understands posthumanism essentially in the sense of post-anthropocentrism. This constitutes a reorientation of the question "What is (hu)man?," as well as a re-evaluation of human responsibility in the age of digital technologies, new media, globalization and, more recently, climate change.

My motivation for carrying out this teaching unit with a focus on "What makes us human?" thus lies, on the one hand, in the relevance of this question for education, teaching and learning, and, on the other hand, in my personal expertise in the field of posthumanism or the emerging field of 'posthuman studies.' My *Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis* (first published in German in 2009, revised English edition in 2013), was the first comprehensive work describing this new intellectual landscape. Against this background, the main point of the teaching unit was to explain the urgency of finding new answers to the question of what it means to be human today. The combination of a 'de-centring' of the human from the point of view of non-human actors and environments – say, from micro-organisms to artificial intelligence – together with an increasing ecological and social responsibility for humans (cf. the recent discussion about the Anthropocene and human extinction) poses a double challenge for a *critical* posthumanism.

In a pedagogical context this requires a problematization of traditional notions of the human at both the level of content and form. In terms of content, the unit was designed in such a way that students would learn, through the genre of science fiction, to describe, analyse and evaluate various "constructions of the future." In doing so they would be encouraged to draw conclusions and find possible answers to the question of the human and 'its' present (and future) self-image. In order to do justice to the current media-technological living and learning situation of many students, learning about the new post-anthropocentric challenge also needed to take place in a *form* that is arguably more recognizably posthuman (if not posthumanist). That is why I decided to use teaching through social media to reflect the fact that human communication due to new, digital and social media platforms such as blogs is increasingly being co-constructed by human and non-human actors (e.g., mobile computing devices, algorithms, data mining bots, etc.). The distributive-cognitive environment which represents human-computer-network interaction might therefore be best suited to illustrate

what ultimately constitutes a relativization of the special status of humans. As 'textual machines,' blogs provide new communication opportunities that are also particularly attractive for language teaching. However, they equally illustrate how new media are changing human self-understanding as well as the form of human-nonhuman interaction. The thematization of these processes and their effects was thus one of the main objectives of this unit.

The Blog 'Environment'

The learning prerequisites for this EFL teaching unit were first of all practical and media-technological. As opposed to secondary (and even primary) schools in the UK, many schools in Germany still do not have fixed data projection facilities or smart boards, and sometimes even wireless internet is still a problem. The best media-technological environment I was able to book for the duration of the unit was a computer room with just about enough terminals to have one screen per student. Through the teacher's console, I had the possibility to project data (the class blog and its links, film clips, etc.) and also to control what was displayed on the individual screens. Another possibility would have been to borrow a large number of tablets, but the number of devices needed and the length of the loan would have caused some difficulty. In addition, there were no projection facilities in the regular classroom apart from mobile and bookable data projection trolleys, which over a period of three to four weeks would have required too much setting-up time and would have been prone to technical glitches. The equipment in the PC room was therefore the best solution and, fortunately, there were neither major technical problems nor double bookings during that period.

The students were asked about their practical knowledge and experience with social media in advance. Most had a good level of previous experience with the usual platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram and (less frequently) Twitter. However, the students had no specific experience with personal web logs (blogs). The first session was therefore used to discuss the functionality of blogs generally, the blog dashboard and the specific genre of a blog post and its addressees. First, I set up my own Edublogs account and the class

blog. To register the students, I asked them to send me an email (an email address is the minimal requirement for opening a student blog). With this minimal amount of personal data information, I added each student to the blog's user list and set up individual blog addresses. The students were then able to log into their individual blogs through their own user account and password, so that each student had access to their own blog as well as the class blog linked to it.

I decided to use Edublogs because they use the familiar WordPress format. Edublogs is an open source platform, based in the US, which has redesigned standard WordPress blogs to specifically cater for educational needs. In its simple version, it is freely available for registered teachers and faculty (see <https://edublogs.org/features/>). Another advantage is that Edublogs does not pass on data for advertising purposes so that students will not be exposed to any online advertising except for messages from Edublogs themselves. To create a 'safe environment,' I made the class blog invisible to search engines (which is an option that you can select during set up to prevent third parties from finding blogs). While this of course defeats the main purpose of blogging, i.e. to communicate with a potentially global readership via the internet, this restriction was important for this educational experiment to be authorised and for the privacy of students to be guaranteed. However, it was possible for the students to surf and link freely from their individual blog platforms, while any traffic to the student and class blogs from other Internet users was restricted. Only the class blog can be viewed 'publicly,' and only for those who know its web address. The students had access to the class blog and, through the 'Reader' function on their own blogs, they could also see all the posts of the other students in class. This way, we created a small 'private' blog community in which everyone could give feedback by using the comment function at the bottom of each post – a feature and experience that was rated very positively in the final student feedback.

As a first step after setting up the blogs, the students received an introduction into security, privacy, netiquette and copyright on the internet. The individual student blog addresses and usernames were anonymised and students were asked to choose nicknames and create avatars that made it impossible (except for the teacher) to associate individual blogs with actual names. In addition, the students were of

course asked to keep their own login data (password and username) secret and secure.

Some Preliminary Educational Considerations

In practical terms, the interaction between teacher and student in a blog-taught unit is significantly different from an everyday classroom situation. There are phases in which the students work on their own computer terminals (or mobile devices) before presenting their findings and discussing their results (either verbally in class, or in writing, on their own, or the class blog). Much of the actual work on the blog, however, happens in 'private,' while the students type away on their individual blogs at home. However, these times are of course also 'contact times' since the interactive nature of blogging always also attracts comments from other users including the teacher and thus at least potentially constitutes a radically mixed 'public-private' sphere.

The big advantage of digital social media for teaching foreign languages is the editability of the texts produced in this way. Although a posted blog cannot be easily withdrawn once published, it can be endlessly revised. The second major benefit is the intermediality of the blog post genre, in which virtually all digital file formats can be embedded either via a link or an actual copy (e.g., images, audio files, software, databases, video, etc.). The intermediality of different platforms is usually referred to as (media) convergence and this creates a new kind of multidimensionality and interactivity, and, above all, it promotes intermedial creativity (see Jenkins 2006).

The Class Blog

Setting up a class blog with its content and its learning trajectory requires a significant amount of time. However, it can also be highly rewarding in terms of the enthusiasm and the empowerment and independence students tend to experience. To encourage this, I merely provided narrative feedback on conceptual aspects in the commentary boxes of student posts (i.e., no corrections). Anything else would have been intrusive and a violation of the freedom of expression, autonomy,

responsibility and ownership on which blogging as a media-communicational practice is based. As content for the class blog I exclusively selected 'authentic texts' (i.e., unabridged, original 'non-didacticized' material). Instead, I provided help with unknown vocabulary wherever necessary in the blog texts themselves, as well as a permanent link or widget to an online dictionary. There were also some practical help pages on various topics (e.g., How to write a good blog post? How to upload an image or audio file, etc.). The aim was to create a fully immersive language environment for the students.

The theme of the blog, "What makes us human?" with its subtitle "Science – Fiction – Culture," is based on a problematization (or a posthumanist critique) of three important (liberal humanist) principles of knowledge construction:

- the differentiation between science fiction and science fact
- the distinction between humans and (nonhuman) animals, and
- the 'controllability' and 'representability' of the future through narrative and discourse.

The information, texts, pictures and videos selected for the class blog narrative were designed to show breaks and contradictions within accepted 'common knowledge' about what it means to be human. This, in fact, corresponds to one of the classic methodologies of cultural studies, namely (Barthesian) "denaturalisation" of everyday cultural myths (Barthes 2000 [1957]). The class blog narrative begins with an evolutionary and paleoanthropological example (i.e., a timeline of hominization provided by the website of the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History), which was used in combination with a YouTube music video (Fat Boy-Slim's "Right Here, Right Now"—for the educational, participatory, importance of YouTube, see Burgess & Greed 2009), which blurs science fiction with science fact. It thus served as an example of a new genre I referred to as "science faction" (cf. Herbrechter 2013, 114-116). Later examples feeding into the discussion of 'anthropocentrism' included a 'disturbingly' anthropomorphizing animal photograph by Tim Flach (from his series "More than Human"), an analysis of the SF saga *Planet of the Apes* with its latest feature (*War for the Planet of the Apes*, 2017), as well as the Voight-Kampff empathy test in *Bladerunner* and a clip from the 'docufictional' series *Life After*

People. Furthermore, I provided links to a number of both serious and playful quizzes on the question of how to distinguish between a replicant and a human (thus expanding the *Bladerunner* scenario). This also provided an invitation to judge the extent to which smart technologies might turn 'us' into cyborgs (or may indeed have already done so). The educational intention behind this selection was to provoke what might be called 'strategic uncertainty' with the idea to challenge well-established thinking patterns and enable students to provide alternative *constructions* of the future (including the future *as* construction, of course) – a learning objective that in my view is of central importance in an age of uncertainty and of uncontrollable global challenges and risks (esp. but not exclusively with regard to climate change). Needless to say that I am not claiming any originality here. All these are classical devices of the kind of self-reflective approach promoted by cultural studies, whose main aim has always been to question the political motivation of knowledge production (of which education is of course a pivotal example). In this sense, going through the experience of this teaching unit in practical terms also raises the question of the special status normally attributed to humans and what the ethical and implications of abandoning 'human exceptionalism' might be.

Methodology

This certainly cannot be the place to open up a discussion about the relationship between subject-specific educational research (in Germany usually classified as *Fachdidaktik*) and the academic disciplines with which this research is usually associated. The theory-practice divide that often comes with this rather arbitrary (sub)disciplinary knowledge division is extremely unhelpful in the sense that there tends to be little meaningful exchange between academic (i.e. university-based) research-led teaching and teacher training institutions (never mind the actual teaching that is going on in schools) even in a long-established subject like English. And this is even less the place, of course, to start problematizing a categorisation like EFL – English as a *foreign* language – in a time of global English, migration and multiculturalism. Education and *national* curricula (especially if, as in the case of Germany, rolled out at the level of federal states) in times of accelerated

globalisation and migration are inevitably going to suffer from a certain degree of provincialism, which, in the face of global challenges for humans and nonhuman alike (cf. the already mentioned digital technologies, new media, globalisation and climate change) is of course less than helpful. This experimental unit cannot address these larger disciplinary and curricular issues. What it does try to do, however, is to show to what extent a combination of language learning and new social media can provide opportunities for conceptual and behavioural changes in students with regard to alternative (i.e., postanthropocentric or posthumanist) constructions of the future.

New media literacy and language learning go hand-in-hand in this process and in this teaching unit. As the BBC – Teaching English website notes: "Blogs offer a hugely exciting platform for learners to express themselves in a new language". A blog in this context constitutes a kind of "public diary" (cf. Ebersbach et al. 2016, 60). Because of their diary-like characteristics, weblogs can support self-reflective processes while also being interactive. For this reason, blogs with their strategic mix of private and public, individual creativity and social participation have evolved into "an alternative information and entertainment system" (2016, 61). In Germany, blogs are being adopted and implemented in schools rather hesitantly. In the Anglo-American context meanwhile blogs have become an important pedagogical platform and learning tool within the last decade or so. Will Richardson's influential *Blogs, Wikis, Podcasts, and Other Powerful Web Tools for Classrooms* was published in 2010. Richardson, one of the pioneers of the pedagogical use of blogs raised the following question with regard to the possibilities and challenges of interactive web education: "What changes must we make in our teaching as it becomes easier to bring primary sources to our students?" (Richardson 2010, 6). And, one might follow up, what kind of "literacy" skills do students need in order to become successful and critical "wreaders [writer-readers]," "prosumers [producer-consumers]" and "producers [producer-users]" under these new, interactive and multimedia conditions (cf. Voigt-Virchow 2011, 61)? Richardson cites a study (Fernet and Brock Eide, 2005) according to which blogs not only "promote critical and analytical" but also "analogical" as well as "creative, intuitive and associational thinking" (Richardson 2010, 20). They thus offer the possibility of comprehensive "access and exposure

to quality information" and efficiently "combine the best of solitary reflection and social interaction" (ibid.). Blogs also facilitate monitoring student development. As a special skill, students learn to develop a "keen awareness of [the] audience" for whom they write (ibid., 30), the ability to find trustworthy sources through the combination of reading and writing that underlies the blogging process, as well as 'editing skills.' Richardson describes the difference between traditional writing and blogging in these, no doubt somewhat polarizing, terms:

Writing stops; blogging continues. Writing is inside; blogging is outside. Writing is monologue; blogging is conversation. Writing is thesis, blogging is synthesis... none of which minimizes the importance of writing. But writing becomes an ongoing process, one that is not just done for contrived purposes of the classroom. (30-31)

In this sense, blogging can be understood as a mixed form of creative writing and analytic-interpretive knowledge production. It is thus, in my view, a perfect critical counterpart *and* complement to the genre of *science fiction*. With their active and affective involvement, blogs also enhance the students' implication in their own learning process (cf. Jodi Dean's description of blogs as "affective networks" [Dean 2010, 91-126]).

Overview of the Unit

Today's teenagers are often believed to be 'digital natives.' Even though students might have greater intuitive affinity to new digital and social media one cannot presuppose that they will also necessarily have developed an ability to use something like a blog 'critically,' i.e. in an explorative, creative but also analytical way to gather, process, interpret and (re)distribute verified knowledge. At the beginning of the teaching unit, I therefore scheduled an introductory session to sensitize students to the idea of self-reflexivity by encouraging them to frequently ask themselves (or their selves): "why am I doing what I'm doing?"

The overall outline of the sessions looked like this (I am, of course, aware that a radically posthumanist teaching practice would have to get away from this, and eventually any, kind of compartmentalisation of

knowledge and from the planification of educational steps usually found in 'lesson plans' altogether, in order to facilitate alternative educational experiences, new non-anthropocentric narratives and nondisciplinary knowledge encounters):

Lesson	Topic	Content
Introduction	Getting Started	Technical induction; overview of the blog unit; some practical guidelines like netiquette and copyright
1	What does it mean to be human?	Problematization of existing definitions of "human"; practical skill: how to write a good blog post
2 + 3	How did we become human?	Evolution and its problematization and narrativization based on a YouTube video clip of Fat Boy Slim's "Right Here, Right Now"; practical skill: how to do a good analysis of a video clip
4	Nonhuman others	Problematization of the human/animal boundary based on the example of primates (photo by Tim Flach; trailer of <i>War for the Planet of the Apes</i> , online article on "Planet Without Apes"); practical skill: how to skim text
5	Science fiction	Science fiction as a genre; the erosion of the boundary between science fiction and science fact; examples (IBM data baby; BBC SF quiz); utopian and dystopian futures: practical skill: fair use of online visual material
6 + 7	Are you a cyborg?	Problematization of the human/machine boundary; the evolutionary role of technology; examples (video clip of Voight-Kampff empathy test in <i>Bladerunner</i> ; BFI quiz); practical skill: how to make an online quiz
8	Saving the planet? Unlearning to be human?	Discussion of the notions of Anthropocene, climate change and extinction through examples of "science fiction" (e.g., <i>Life After People</i>)
9	Feedback	Summary and evaluation; practical skill: how to produce and upload an audio file

As homework, at the end of each session, the students were given a practical blog task to complete that involved both analytical and practical skills. In this way, over the course of the unit, each student was able to put together a personal blog portfolio which was then also used as a basis for individual assessment (since, usually and problematically, from a posthumanist point of view, assessment still has to be mapped back onto the 'individual').

The Individual Lessons

The overall narrative of the class blog can be summarised in a few points:

- in order to find new (and less 'exceptionalist,' i.e. not based on the idea of human 'uniqueness') answers to the question "what does it mean to be human?" one has to start by problematizing traditional common sense notions of 'humanness.' One also has to historicize in order to see the constantly changing and thus essentially open nature of the category 'human';
- evolution and science fiction are 'discourses' engaged in specific practices of 'constructions of the future' out of which utopian and dystopian alternative scenarios to contemporary realities can arise;
- traditional definitional oppositions like human versus animal or human versus machine are increasingly being eroded by technology *at the same time* as new global threats and challenges are emerging like anthropogenic climate change, resource depletion, pollution and a dramatic decrease in biodiversity;
- all of this leads both to a '*de*-centring' of the human in relation to the environment and nonhuman others as well as a '*re*-centring' in terms of human responsibility;
- the main political challenge that the ideas of the 'posthuman' and 'postanthropocentrism' pose is: how to act self-reflectively or even self-effacingly *and* responsibly at once?

What does it mean to be human?

The aim of the first blog-based lesson was to get us thinking about and problematizing the question "what does it mean to be human?" We

began by looking at Leonardo's Vitruvian man as an example of anthropocentrism and human perfection, followed by a discussion about which scientific disciplines, today, are actually involved in defining the human (e.g., biology, (paleo)anthropology, philosophy, theology etc.). This also served as the starting point for the first blogging task, namely an internet search for 'interesting' definitions of 'human.' The idea was to find examples that could serve to inform students' own attempt at defining what it means to be human. The task thus demanded information retrieval, analysis, as well as affective involvement and additionally had a 'persuasive' component" (i.e., Hello world! Look what I found and was able to come up with). Like most writing tasks in this unit, methodologically, the first blog post was a mixture between guided and 'free' (or creative) writing, or between an open and a closed writing task. The advantage of such an approach is that it is at once a continuation of standard textual analysis, as well as an invitation to self-reflectively thematise personal experience and aspects of self-determination. It also promotes experimenting with language, developing individual writing strategies and expanding active vocabulary.

Researching existing definitions of 'the human' fed into the writing task and was a pragmatic introduction to the affordance of editability that blog posting provides, and which turns blogging into an ongoing and uncompletable, always provisional writing process. The whole unit was designed in such a way that students would constantly be invited to revisit and rewrite their posts (WordPress also offers an 'unpublished draft' function which some students also used to good effect). Furthermore, the final writing task formally required the students to return to their initial definition and revise it in view of the content of the unit and the undergone learning experience. The individual class blog pages accordingly were only 'revealed' as we went along, i.e. at the beginning of the lesson to which they referred.

A particularly engaging example in this respect was the following (very slightly edited) post (let me repeat that my aim, at this stage, was not to correct language mistakes):

LOVE, DREAMS, DECISIONS? – HUMANITY AND ITS BIGGEST QUESTION

Every toddler knows that it's a human being, but why isn't there anyone that can exactly tell us what it means to be HUMAN.

On my search for an answer to this difficult question I've found the, in my opinion, three most interesting definitions that are trying to explain the state of being a "human individual."

"What makes us human is not our mind but our heart, not our ability to think but our ability to love." (Henri Nouwen)

"Daring to dream what is deepest our collective longings is what makes us most human and fully alive." (Wendy Wright)

"It's the ability to choose which makes us human." (Madleine L'Engle)

So in a nutshell "human" mankind is able to love, dream and choose.

Emotions are the key to a human way of life, to be what we're supposed to: Loving, learning and deciding creatures that should care about each other. This approach is the reason for my personal statement to the biggest question of mankind:

In my opinion it's the ability to feel empathy with fellow man that makes us human.

Mankind wouldn't be capable of understanding needs and emotions if they couldn't develop the skill of empathizing with human beings and that's why they wouldn't associate with anyone else but themselves any longer. Without people caring about each other and without feeling responsible anymore, we wouldn't be better than animals that simply take care of their urges.

My commentary was:

Great definition! It's the ability to empathize that makes us human. Two questions: why do so many humans not empathize (with other humans or nonhumans)? And, do you think (nonhuman) animals don't feel empathy?

And the student got back by saying:

Empathy is something you have to learn, it isn't an ability you're born with. So if your parents or your environment never thought you how important it is to empathize, you're not the one to blame.

Actually, I do think that animals are able to feel empathy but they can't express it the way humans do.

There were other examples of this kind of exchange between teacher and student and between students themselves which clearly show students' level of affective involvement in their own research process and blog production. After comparing and discussing results in class, students were encouraged to post their definitions on the blog page of the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History which invites responses by students from all over the world to the question "what does it mean to be human?"

How did we become human?

The second and third lesson were based on an audio-visual task in which a YouTube music video clip of Fat Boy Slim's "Right Here, Right Now" had to be placed within the (previously discussed) context of evolution and then within the wider context of a problematization of the distinction between human and animal. As a first visual stimulus students looked at the banner image of the blog which shows the (science-factual) 'continuation' of natural into artificial evolution (i.e., from ape to cyborg – a theme taken up again in the sixth and seventh lesson). In addition, there were also two preliminary reading tasks, one on the Smithsonian Museum's website, namely a timeline of hominization, and the other, a cartoon depicting a human who 'turns round' to his evolutionary predecessors and says "stop following me." Fat Boy Slim's video shows a mixture of science fiction and science fact and obviously only gives a rather sketchy but thoroughly entertaining account of human evolution, from a single cell organism in the ocean to an obese middle-aged man sitting on a bench in Manhattan. The writing

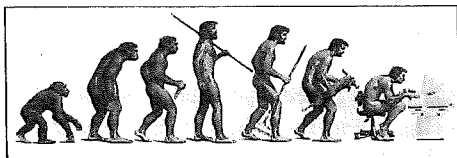
task for the students was to watch the video clip at home as many times as necessary and come up with a description, analysis and interpretation of what they saw.

Again, let me quote an example:

"Right Here, Right Now" is a song by the British musician Fatboy Slim, released on 19 April 1999 as the fourth single from his second studio album *You've Come a Long Way, Baby*. The song reached the 2nd placement on the UK Singles Chart for one week.

The video shows us the process of evolution condensed in about three and a half minutes. This story is told by looking from the first living creatures to our species today – the Homo Sapiens. It ends with a fat man sitting down on a bench in a big city at night.

From my perspective the "message" is that we just eat and have only few physical activity all the time and work too less – so it is kind of criticism concerning human acting of today. It should encourage ourselves to do more for *our* world and *our* prospective evolution – and not just living a lonely lazy life.



Somewhere, something went terribly wrong

[Image: Graham Steel, 2009]

My commentary was this:

I like the connection you make between the video and the image – something, somewhere went terribly wrong... So, are you saying we need to take care of our own further evolution? How does that work do you think?

There were other, more detailed, solutions but what in my view particularly stands out in this example is the maturity and elegance with

which this (15-year-old) student completed a complex writing task (in a 'foreign' language) while making good use of the creative possibilities afforded by a blog post.

Nonhuman Others

A detailed analysis and extensive commentary on each individual task, the students' ideas and responses as well as my interaction would be beyond the scope of this contribution, so my focus will be on what I consider to be the essential steps within the class blog's narrative and how they were translated into student learning tasks. Lesson four probably contained the most difficult task (even though quite a few students said in their feedback that they found the first task, the definition of the human, most challenging). The online articles which the students were asked to skim read and comment on (one about the fact that humans are a lot less "unique" than they think (Hogenboom 2015) and the other, by Craig Stanford, containing a summary comment on his book *Planet Without Humans* (2014)), were quite daunting to some of them. This was due to the texts' length and complexity of argument, as well as the amount of new vocabulary they contained. Nevertheless, the requirement actually was merely to find the central paragraph in either of these two articles, to explain what was going on and to comment briefly. Most students managed to come up with some well-structured and perceptive thoughts, like these, for example:

NONHUMAN OTHERS – UNIQUE OR NOT?

Humans always thought they were unique; the only creatures with emotions, morality and culture. But the more scientists investigate animals, the more they discover that this is not true, because all these traits are also found in animals. Charles Darwin wrote: "There is no fundamental difference between man and the higher mammals in their mental faculties and all the differences are of degree, not of kind."

In the article the author lists some points that had been considered a uniquely human ability, but can be found in animals too:

Chimpanzees use tools

- Chimpanzees show intricate social behaviours like morality (defined as showing fairness, altruism and empathy)
- They possess mind-reading skills (They can figure out what others are thinking and what their intentions are)
- Chimpanzees even have culture (defined as passing on knowledge, habits and transmission from one generation to the next)
- They use a complex system of communication with gestures and facial expressions

The main argument of the article is that the differences are not absolute, but rather a matter of degree, and by that measure humans are no more unique than any other animal.

In my opinion there are still differences enough to make us unique. Skills and behaviours might be similar, but can you imagine that chimpanzees investigate humans and write articles or books about us? Chimpanzees use a complex system of communication, but we use our language. We don't communicate only by seeing and speaking to each other, we can also communicate by written language like a letter, books or even whatsapp. We use technologies no other mammal was able to develop, because we are rational beings.

In general, students tended, ultimately, to preserve some form of human exceptionalism but they clearly also started revising their initial standpoints and thus potentially opened themselves up to the idea of a 'weak' form of 'postanthropocentrism' while acknowledging an enhanced human responsibility for planetary environmental issues.

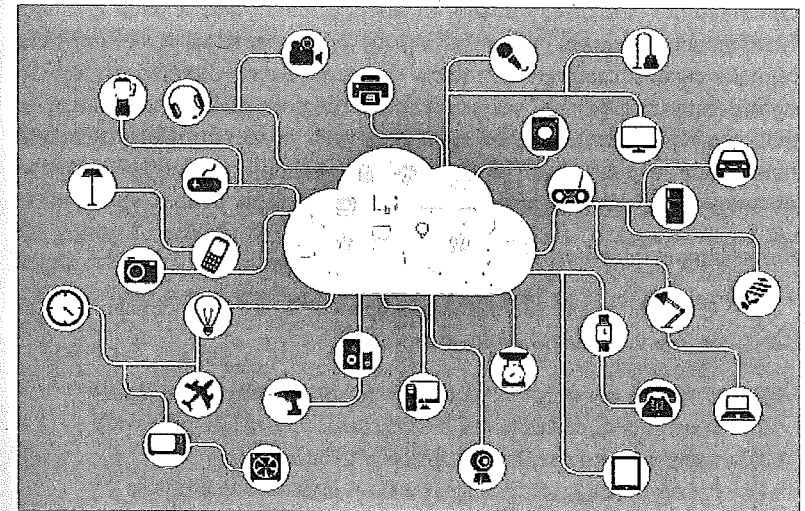
Science Fiction

In lesson five, we further problematized the distinction between science fiction and science fact, as well as the one between human and machine. In addition, some more practical and critically creative new media skills were taught, in particular, the embedding of images into blog posts. I used the well-known video clip (again available on YouTube) of IBM's "Data Baby" to ask students to work out a definition of science fiction/science faction in the light of what they saw and to post it on the

class blog. This was then discussed in class and used as preparation for the blogging task at home. The idea was for the students to find (or indeed make, mash up, etc.) their 'own' picture of the future and to explain their choice. This critical-creative task engaged the students in their own 'construction of the future' and, in a sense, invited them to think practically about their implication in something like science *faction*. For the first time, they were also formally required to use the full spectrum of media convergence afforded by their individual blogs. Here, again, is one, in my view, particularly successful example:

Image of the future

I chose that picture, because I think in the future every electronic device will be connected with each other. They will communicate via the cloud and tell us what we should buy or drive us to our next appointment autonomic. I think this will make our everyday life easier, but it could also be dangerous because of the big concerns having all our data.



[Image: GDJ (2015) Cloud Network]

Are You a Cyborg?

The main objective for lessons six and seven was to get students to think about human ontology. Through a combination of a film clip and an online quiz designed by the British Film Institute they were supposed to consider the idea of a replicant. The clip and the quiz were used because they interacted in the following way: the clip from *Bladerunner* (on YouTube) shows Deckard (Harrison Ford) administering the so-called (and, of course, 'fictional') Voight-Kampff empathy test to find out whether Rachel (Sean Young) is a 'real' human or a replicant (i.e., an android). The BFI quiz then uses exactly the same questions that Deckard asked as a multiple choice test so that the students could test themselves. Quite a few students said in their feedback that this was the highlight (maybe also the turning point) of the unit for them. The quiz then fed into the next practical-creative but also analytical-critical task in which the students were asked to devise their own online quiz with questions that were designed to differentiate between humans and replicants. This was thus another 'learning-by-doing' exercise which contained the deliberate blurring of science fiction and science fact as a heuristic step towards understanding the problematic aspect of defining humans against nonhuman others. Students were directed to a free online (open source) and very easy to handle quiz-making software. The generated quiz was inserted into a blog post in the form of a link and thus made available to other students without anybody having to download or install any of the programmes.

Some sample questions the students devised were:

Your mother and you had a big argument. You are super angry and go outside to calm down. Where do you go?

- 1) to the end of the world. I don't want to see my mother ever again
- 2) to my friends. I need to talk
- 3) to my worst enemy. I need somebody to beat
- 4) I'm super angry, so I kick against street lights and start crying

[The "correct" choice set by the student who devised the quiz was number 4]

You're driving down the street in your huge SUV. Suddenly a deer appears on the road. What are you going to do?

- 1) I hit the brakes as hard as I can and drive around it!
 - 2) I try to bypass it, that's the best I can do.
 - 3) I stop the car as fast as I can and get out to escort the deer back into the forest.
 - 4) It's just a deer, who cares? I certainly don't!
- [Here the answer that would come up as correct was 3]

Saving the planet? Unlearning to be human?

The topic of the ninth and last lesson was conceptually probably the most demanding but of course also the most important one, since it contained the concluding *ecological* message the previous lessons, by challenging the distinctions or binary oppositions human/animal, human/technology, human/non-human (including the 'environment'), had been building up to. It was also the point at which the notion of the 'Anthropocene' was discussed and illustrated by two video clips (one, purely 'informative' and documentary, available through the *Smithsonian Magazine* site, and the other, 'docufictional' or 'science factionial,' taken from *Life After People*). These provided visualisations of postanthropocentric scenarios that were supposed to lead students towards a reevaluation of their initial ideas about and definitions of the human in the light of (science fictional and science-factual) constructions of the future.

One such summary expressed the critical role of SF in this process as follows:

What constructive role plays science fiction if we think about the question what makes us human again?

So what makes us human now?

My first definition was

Humans are humans because they want to know everything. They will never be pleased if they are not understanding essential questions and one of them/us will always continue asking WHY? or HOW?

And after writing all these blogposts and thinking about what makes us human so much

In my opinion one of the points that makes us human is that we know that we are polluting and destroying our own world. Some of the Science Fiction movies show that we know that we're compromising the life of many species and even our own, with our way of life. In the movies we can also see the dystopian future and her aftermaths, which threatens us. We are able to see clearly what we're doing to our planet and we get warned enough to understand this almost every day and also through Science Fiction. Nevertheless the most of us don't want to see it, and that's why we ignore this fact.

So this is what makes us human, our naivety.

Although this post obviously still hangs on to some form of human exceptionalism it does so in a rather minimalist and possibly even ironic way (in the sense of: humans are exceptionally 'naïve'). In my view, this may serve as a good basis for further discussion about "what makes us human" and what responsibilities this might imply.

Conclusion

Teaching, learning and schools of the future will have to come to terms with new media and their affordances, with all their advantages and disadvantages, and, most of all, with their potential to change realities and futures. Behind the spectre of 'digitalization' lie a variety of fears and desires that often have little to do with everyday experience of educational practice. Unfortunately, these still tend to have a (usually negative) influence. This blog-based 'interdisciplinary' teaching unit, in my view, has provided a small contribution to the shift towards a more practice-oriented and creative-critical approach in foreign language

teaching. Of course, even though blogs are no radical innovation by any account anymore, they are still being used quite sparingly and often only in a supportive, instrumentalized function in secondary schools. However, taking blogs seriously as a genre and starting to engage with the multimodal potential of digital media convergence – just like most teenagers are already doing in their everyday life media consumption on their mobile multimedia devices (i.e., their smart phones) – will revive some of the original dynamic of the internet, namely the potential access to the entirety of human (and non-human) knowledge including its global and immediate communicability. As Will Richardson notes:

Depending on the focus, Weblogs in the classroom have the potential to affect student learning in many positive ways. Blogging can teach critical reading and writing skills, and it can lead to greater information management skills. It can help students become much more media and information literate by clarifying the choices they make about the content they write about, it can teach them about how networks function – both human and computer – and it can teach the essential skill of collaboration. (Richardson 2010, 37)

In addition, the unit presented here has in my view led to a new (self-) understanding at least in some of the students. The fact that this change happened through the 'medium' of English as a foreign language plays an additional, intensifying, namely affective role. Nothing is more enlightening – and this of course goes beyond a merely 'intercultural' perspective – than to become part of a new knowledge community where there are no longer any 'mother tongues' or 'foreign languages,' but maybe only a truly global *lingua franca* (if such a thing exists) that serves to tackle global, 'humanitarian' (i.e., including human and nonhuman actors) and planetary challenges. For this reason, the next, essential, step in the continuation of this experiment would be to open up the blogs to the 'outside' world and encourage students to take advantage of and engage with, precisely, a *planetary* audience. However, this will inevitably turn the *controlled* experiment presented here into an uncontrollable one – which would go beyond the still predominantly humanistic, analogue and anthropocentric default position in most (secondary) education. Language is of course not just any medium, but it too has to adapt to the new communicative conditions like, for

example, the fact that in the age of posthumanism and postanthropocentrism communication increasingly takes place not between humans, but between smart media environments, animals and objects, all based on "distributed cognition" (cf. Hayles 2005; and Hayles 1999). As a small contribution to the (re)mediation processes that arise out of this emerging new world picture this teaching unit has without any doubt opened up discussions in this particular class that will, hopefully, lead to a further critical engagement with the ongoing construction of futures, some of which undoubtedly postanthropocentric and posthumanist.

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Roman Bartosch

From a Dog's Eye View? Anthropomorphism and Anamorphosis in Eva Hornung's *Dog Boy* (2009) and John Berger's *King: A Street Story* (1999)

Dog Boy

In her brilliant, reality-saturated and astonishingly understudied¹ novel *Dog Boy* (2009), Australian novelist Eva Hornung tells the story of four-year-old Romochka who grows up with his mother and his alcoholic uncle in a run-down district of post-Soviet Moscow as the most vulnerable member of a dysfunctional family. One morning he wakes up abandoned and alone. Everybody has disappeared; not only his mother and his uncle, but the whole apartment block seems to be deserted. Instinctively (rather than desperately, the narration suggests), he walks out onto the street, joins a pack of feral dogs and follows them to their lair. This marks the beginning of a fascinating tale about an interspecies collaboration, about their life together, about affection and adaptation, fear and belonging, rules, hierarchy and power, and, ever-present, the struggle for survival: survival of winters of up to -30°C, of periods of hunger, attacks of rival dogs, and ill-willing humans. If there is warmth to be found in the world for the young protagonist, both literally and symbolically, the dogs rather than Romochka's fellow humans provide it.

The present chapter will investigate fictional engagements with human-animal relationships with a focus on two contemporary novels, Hornung's *Dogboy* and John Berger's *King: A Street Story* (1999). Both texts offer fundamentally different versions of interspecies encounters; but great as the narratological and thematic divide may be, the overlap of the (human) animals' shared physicality, worldhoods, and knowledges provides the basis for an approach that reveals how both make productive use of the fictional means of creating ambiguity through