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Bien dans sa Peau?

An investigation into the role of professional learning in the formation of online teaching identities of part time academics

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Abstract

The advent of the 2005 HEFCE strategy for e-learning the role of new technologies in Higher education has continued to gain pace, playing a key part in the vision of global individual, organisational and community education. A principal element within the practical articulation of the strategy has been the importance of equipping a 'growing army' (Bryson 2002), of part time teaching academics with the knowledge and skills that they need to manipulate the online tools; to develop new pedagogies and find new ways of feeling effective within their role; to feel like creative 'bricoleurs' (Turkle 1995), happy to experiment and pedagogically innovate rather than to feel victims of technological determinism, constrained by the perceived imposition of new technologies to the detriment of their professional identities and academic autonomy. This two-year qualitative study investigated the role of professional learning in the formation of online teaching identities. The results revealed key areas of professional learning and also yielded insights into development opportunities which the individuals themselves felt would be instrumental in enhancing their confidence, skills and knowledge in online teaching and learning.

Introduction

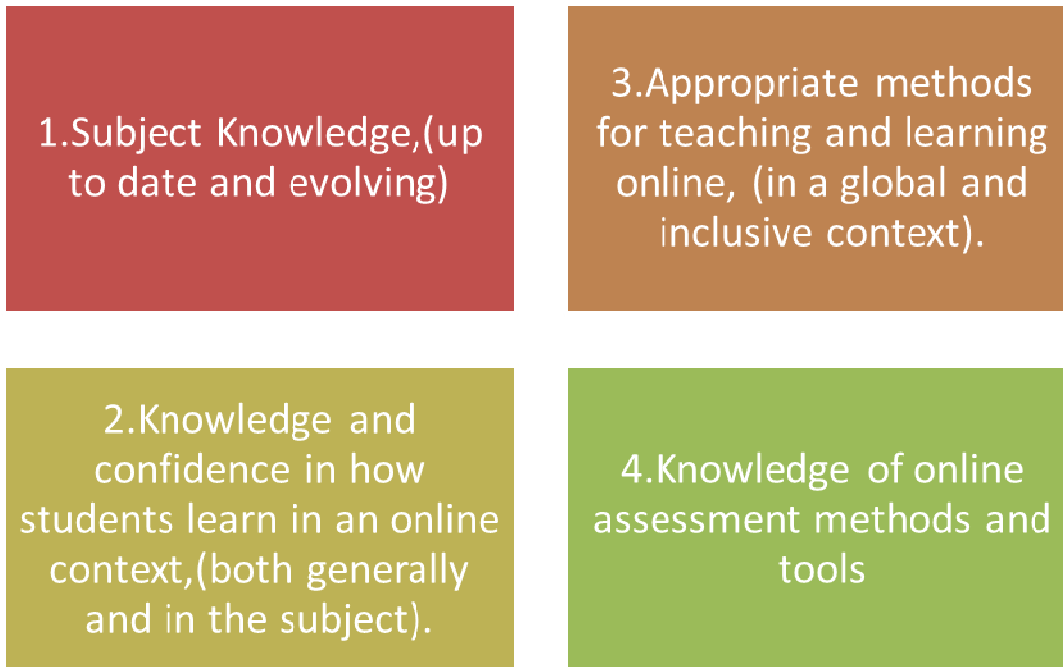
For some years now, educational developers have been exploring ways in which to encourage academics to engage fully with new technologies, offering online, face to face and synchronous forms of development opportunities. Feedback from participants has informed the ways in which new opportunities for professional learning in this context are shaped and formed, but to there has been little research into what learning interactions and experiences those individuals perceive to be fundamental to the ways in which their online teaching identities are formed. Research into the impact on academic identities has been limited, often negating the 'messiness and lived reality of change' (Hanson 2009:557). This study aimed to uncover some of the challenges, feelings and professional learning needs of the respondents.

The investigation took a phenomenological approach (Langridge 2007); using data collected from a series of semi structured interviews, two each, with 11 respondents from a single university, The Open University, both carried out over a period of 6 months.

The Open University has some 8000 part time Associate Lecturing staff, teaching on over 500 courses using a blend of media. Some 62% of courses offered are web focussed using a number of differing tools to deliver learning. Some courses have been using e-technology for some time while others are more recently adopting new technologies. The case study approach was thought to be a particularly useful method for the study, giving voice to the lived realities of the respondents (Yin1993).

Context and process of the study

The study uses a framework for professional learning which comprises four sections and is adopted from the Higher Education Academy standards document. (2006) The framework is outlined in diagrammatic form below:



Concepts of Academic Identities formation and change

The importance of developing a professional identity within a field has been recognised as a key to both motivation and retention of the individual, linking strongly to overall performance and job satisfaction. (Beijaard et al 2004, Maclure 1993). A number of studies have revealed that professional identities are constructed via personal meaning and context (Baxter 2003, Beijaard et al 2004, Maclure 1993).

Stories of teacher identities reveal that a key element of successful identity formation engenders closing the gap between the identity that you have and the identity you aspire to (Sfard and Prusak 2005, Wenger 2000, Maclure 1993). Teaching has long been recognised as work in which emotions are central (Banks et al 1999, Day 2004, Maclure 1993), ‘teachers invest their personal and professional selves in their workplace’ (Day 2004), and need to feel the concomitant professional satisfaction of ‘doing a good job’. The role of emotion cannot be underestimated within this professional context, and former studies have revealed that:

- ‘1. Emotional intelligence is at the heart of good professional practice.
 2. Emotions are indispensable to rational decision making.
 3. Emotional health is crucial to effective teaching over a career.
 4. Emotional and cognitive health is affected by personal biography, and social context of work and home.
- ‘(ibid: 45)

This study revealed modelling and mentoring to be key aids to feelings of professional satisfaction and feelings of ‘doing a good job’, (Baxter et al 2007,), creating self narratives that that enhanced feelings of capability and efficacy. Insights into what it means to be an efficient teaching professional took a variety of differing yet complimentary perspectives.

Narrative and issues on professional effectiveness

Expectations of what would be expected of individuals as tutors , revealed key differences between perceptions of tutoring for the OU compared to the lived reality:

Come and do summer school they said ,so I did and found it brilliant , a bit like Woodstock, I signed up to be an Associate Lecturer thinking it would be a bit like summer school , but it wasn't . It was very different. I love OU students and find that they bring stuff to the sessions that I'd never heard of before; lots of bigger issues, life issues. It sometimes feels like a quiet revolution; giving people knowledge they wouldn't have got any other way. (Mark lines 155-159)

But some respondents had applied for lecturing jobs on the strength past experiences of having studied OU courses, and were finding that the ways in which they were expected to teach to be very different to their prior experiences and perceptions of what it meant to be an OU tutor.

‘When I did my course, I lived for tutorials, a good old chat followed by a cup of tea and a bun...socialising now, well its just about impossible ...’(Derek, line 44-45).

Hanna emphasised that the experience of online teaching could be much enhanced if there had been at least one opportunity to meet with students first.

If you haven't met these students and know a bit about them, marking, it just becomes an automatic task - ploughing through masses of anonymous scripts. When you know the students, then their work speaks to you in a meaningful way. (Hannah lines 227-229)

Some positive feelings about working online were articulated by a number of respondents, who felt that the online working gave them the opportunity to project a different , more organised identity than they could in a face to face environment:

Sometimes you feel as if you're doing a more thorough job by responding to student via emails. Some students find it much easier to email than to phone. Perhaps they're thinking, ‘oh she might be talking to her husband or washing the dog!’ ...it gives me time to collect my thoughts, to reference my response and makes me feel more organised. ‘I feel less scattered than when I teach face to face’ (Duncan lines 334-337).

But many academics stated that gaining effective feedback was very difficult online:

Doing a good job; its about student feedback, not that type of automated questionnaire type of feedback, but the type that you get from the student; body language , the look on their face when you know they've ‘got it’, the informal feedback that you get at the end of a session. That's difficult online; you can't see their body language, you can't see them all together, to see whether you've been talking nonsense and not reached anyone in the group, or whether there are a few blank faces, but on the whole, they're with you. (Janet lines 105-110).

Facilitating discussion online was felt by many to be a difficult area , particularly if they felt professionally effective at doing this in a traditional environment:

‘Normally I love group discussions, but online I just can’t seem to get them going. ‘They sometimes start off well ,but then just seem to fizzle out, I’d love to see how other people do them ‘. (Marion lines 96-98)

Academic identities in transition the impact of learning and the view from the chalk face.

The narratives reflect the way in which the Associate Lecturer, working remotely from the University articulates their view of professional learning and its impact on their working identities. The dialogue points up the point at which the professional is attempting to draw back from embracing the technology , the physical or psychological ‘ sticking points ‘which prevent self actualisation within the individual , the point at which the individual retreats back into safe territory; the point of metanoia . (Alsup 2006, Maslow 1943).

The narrative also raises some interesting points in terms of the impact of technology on the student attitude to learning, echoing Mason’s concerns about longer term effects of social networking technologies on student autonomy and capacity to engage with difficult concepts without recourse to a tutor. (Mason et al 2008:136)

Narrative of Professional learning and its impact on the online teaching identity

Many academics using social networking tools and portable technologies in their lives outside of the University found that their knowledge of these tools was not always a positive when viewed within the teaching context.

John found that his knowledge and social use of technology had some negative impacts on the way that he engaged with students:

‘I think that student expectations of me are changing. I feel that they think that I’m there 24 hours a day. It’s partly my fault; if a student message comes in on my Blackberry, then I tend to respond. Then they get used to that and always expect it-zap – I’m there.’ (John, lines 2-4).

Judy found that her use of Face book created some tricky situations within the context of her students:

I love using Face book for friends and family , but lately my students have been sending me friend requests...I find that uncomfortable , I mean its not the same as meeting down the bar – this way they can connect to everyone you know ‘. (Judy, lines 12-14).

Professional learning in the online teaching situation was viewed very widely indeed with many respondents feeling that their learning about online teaching was being gained almost as much through external situations and learning, than by development opportunities within The University.

Professional learning is a funny thing when it comes down to online teaching? I did a repertory grid the other day, and it came out that all of the stuff I really valued, I’d learned outside of school and professional context. (Mark, lines 12-14).

Some lecturers felt that University systems were rather clunky and difficult to use when compared to social applications , and that this disadvantaged both staff and students:

Some of the systems that we use – they just aren’t intuitive at all! I need to learn more about how to use them, but so do the students; even really web savvy ones have no idea when it comes to using the type of

setup that we do here. So in an ideal world, I'd have students and tutors all given a proper online induction; so we're all starting from the same point. (Ruby, lines 227-230).

Mentoring and modelling was felt to be key to developing a strong online presence, but opportunities to do this were rare:

When you start out at teaching, you model yourself on teachers you've had in the past. Its difficult to do online if you've never studied a course online'.(Dan, line 107-108).

Grace felt that she would benefit from a mentoring relationship so that she could talk more about her online role and how she could develop further.

I did do the tutor moderator's course, and learned quite a lot from it, but the downside was that we didn't keep in touch afterwards, so there was no follow up. I couldn't discuss my progress with anyone so I just stopped developing'. (Grace, lines 15-17).

There was a feeling that professional appraisal was not only important to future development, but also to the way in which the AL was perceived to be part of the University community.

You know , in 15 years no one has ever sat me down and said , ' look where are you going with your teaching career at the University', even though I've done hours and hours of teaching , and I think, become pretty well practiced in this type of teaching. It's fragmented and it shouldn't be. Now we're going online you need other ways to feel part of the Uni. (Sue, lines 29-32)

Conclusions

The narratives reflect Turkle's original thought that the 'heightened incompleteness' provided by the many identities we can assume via the web, provoke a much greater need than before for professional collegiality (Turkle 1995). In the absence of face to face interactions with colleagues, there seemed to be a heightened feeling that The University should be taking a more active role in promoting this, via mentoring, professional dialogue and peer observation.

The rapid and evolving pace of technologies and feelings that students were more adept at these technologies than their teachers was a key concluding point of Hanson's (2009) study into the impact of e- learning on academic identities in HE and has been developed within this study. Academics were often aware of social networking tools and their popularity compared to tools offered by the University, but lack of time and fear of being professionally 'exposed', preventing them from exploring further. In addition, the study revealed a dichotomy between the ease of use of social networking tools on the internet and those offered internally, provoking a mismatch of expectations in terms of what the University terms as online teaching and learning, and what the student understands by this. The part time academic, caught between the two, struggling with new notions of student engagement.

The notion of professional dialogue, a conversation between professionals to promote reflection on action (Schön 1987), and improve practice via discussion, deliberation and constructive collegiality (Baxter 2004, Coates 2008), was highlighted not only in terms of established understanding of mentoring (Butcher 2001), but also in terms of the establishment of what McFarlane (2004:21), terms a 'shared identity' that underpins

practice. McFarlane advocates an 'integrity based approach' (ibid: 157) viewing university teachers as people whose personal values inform their professional practice. Where these personal values are under threat, it is more vital than ever that HE teachers be offered the opportunity to discuss new meanings and discourses relating to online teaching and learning. So that these can be inculcated into the new professional identities and used to inspire and encourage creative experimentation, safe in the notion that the concepts and ethics underpinning online teaching are robustly integrated into the model of what it means to be an online HE teacher. A key facet of the study was the comment that interviews themselves afforded an opportunity for reflection, consideration and discussion, hitherto not afforded to the individuals in their professional teaching situations.

Looking back at the narratives there is an indication that out of the four key areas within the framework for professional development it is areas two and three that are causing concern to academics. Concentration of development in these areas, integrating ideas and suggestions that appear throughout the narratives, may prove effective not only in terms of enhancement of online teaching and learning, but also in terms of greater engagement, motivation and retention of HE part time academics.

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