

RHETORIC OF THE DIGITIZED FACULTY – A CROSS CULTURAL ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF HIGHER EDUCATION LECTURERS AT THE CROSS-ROADS OF PEDAGOGIC CHANGE

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Abstract

This paper follows on from a recent study into the impact of automated student support on adjunct and tenured faculty staff identity and personal well-being (see Collins et al 2016). This demonstrated the importance of considering lived experiences of lecturers during the introduction of a disruptive digitized change strategy in a UK Business School. This complementary study focuses on a subsequent second stage of the project and reports on values and experiences of adjuncts and Faculty working with a virtual learning environment (VLE) through a period of large scale institutional change at a UK distance learning focused university compared with business academics (adjunct and Faculty) at a campus based university located in the Middle East.

A common thread that emerged from the interviews was a symbiotic relationship of mutual necessity and support between adjunct and faculty whose roles are inextricably bound whether in a digital or face to face teaching environment. As the locus of pedagogy and what it means to work in higher education moves inexorably online for the UK based adjuncts in this study, shared meanings and descriptors of identity processes in being an 'adjunct' give valuable insight when compared with a traditional academic environment elsewhere. Similarities and differences in beliefs, perceptions of value to their institutions and associated correlations from the wider environment are reported on here in this early, exploratory paper on this investigation. Themes emerging from the findings also include: - *competition and collaboration in Higher Education, culture in Higher Education, financial and cost orientations, student orientation and technology in practice.*

Keywords: academic identity; change; digitization, academic values

1 INTRODUCTION

In the UK, with cost-orientated moves to expanding online provision through emergent technologies and the growth of alternative HE strategies, such as credit-bearing MOOCs; traditional group-orientated student and lecturer interactions are developing into a continuum. Long-established organisations of lecturer and what was considered as 'their' student cohort are changing in size, scope and academic input as digital pedagogy evolves and is implemented in strategies, such as open access to online tutorials. Within the comparator Middle Eastern institution, the desire to be competitive on a research as well as teaching platform that offers an attractive range of media for students also brings changes. These include a greater symbiosis with necessary adjunct staff freeing faculty time for research and other scholarly activity, whilst adjuncts, with pre-dominantly industry experience, often lead on digital initiatives.

By mainstreaming a digitized strategy the institution is aiming to increase student numbers and retention, a desire resulting from an environment of external benchmarks and increased student fees in the UK, whereas in the middle east digital learning is described in terms of a valuable addition to the learners' experiences and ultimately, job prospects. However, face to face tuition remains a cornerstone of teaching and learning in that cultural context.

In the UK, this digital design initiative has resulted in a number of consequences for teaching staff. Whilst the 'student experience' has been standardised in terms of academic qualification communications and teaching materials offered to students these changes have necessarily required all teaching staff to learn new processes, thus unlearning previous pedagogical support routines. The previous study (Collins et al 2016) found this altered their academic roles and their perception of their academic identity within the University, particularly in relation to pastoral care which needed to be judged at the individual student level. Additionally, evidence emerged particularly binding this changing identity to respondents 'adjunct' status at the institution. Therefore, a second stage

investigation was undertaken to see whether it was the digital environment driving these reported internal conflicts, identity under pressure and changed behaviours, or whether these were part of a wider, more internationally applicable experience of being 'other' in higher education in the role of an adjunct.

This second stage of comparative research was undertaken using auto-ethnography and in-depth interviews with lecturers of two institutes, which were transcribed and analysed using content analysis with the aim of uncovering the effect of working digitally on lecturers' identity processes, changes to their role and in consequence their perception of their own academic identity. The investigation adds to emerging literature by examining the underreported lived experiences of faculty at the 'teaching coal face' during this period of disruptive change at the UK institute and its impact on a group of teaching academics as an outcome of the change initiative. We then compared this with an emergent and complementary rather than radical digitization change process undertaken at the other institution.

Study into these changes to academic routines and identity has value, as the shifts in perceived identity demonstrate a tangible impact on the teaching academics' motivation; their role and perception of their identity as valuable to their institution and, in some cases, has resulted in resistance to change. This project adds to the literature as much existing retention literature privileges the institutional or student experience, and much of learning / unlearning literature is in a non-educational setting. Therefore combined with academic identity this gives insight into the values of developing an institutionally inclusive culture during change processes. It is particularly relevant as in the UK, the management of the institution studied start to question the unique competitive advantage offered by a large, highly qualified adjunct staff, with a view to giving some of these adjuncts a fractional permanent role enabling the institute to give a more secure environment.

NB. Given the varying terms and conditions and nomenclature of staff on contracts where the main similarity is a non-permanent status, the term 'adjunct' has been used throughout for congruence with the wider literature. Similarly, the term 'faculty' is used to denote members of staff who hold a permanent office within a university.

Literature

Researching the academic "precariat"

In recent years, the theme of precarious work and its effects on individuals' identity within the Higher Education sector and elsewhere has become an important field for academic study, with contributions offered from European, US and Australian perspectives in particular. Critical University Studies have emerged to focus on the consequences of corporate approaches that increase managerial control, cutting regular faculty provision whilst increasing adjunct staff and student debt (see Williams, 2012). At the time of writing, little information was found from Middle Eastern perspectives of academic precarious work, making this a worthwhile gap for investigation.

Tirelli (2014: 527) offers a short history of forty years of evolution in this area within a US context, highlighting the increasing use of contingent academic labor that offer institutions budgetary savings and flexibility, but also a dissonance of false legitimacy that weakens faculty governance and benefits management. He cites Curtis and Thornton (2014) who report on massive rises in 'administrative bloat', particularly at the senior level, as well as rising numbers of part-time non-tenured teaching staff. Tirelli (2014: 531) also highlights contingent academic labor as part of the reproduction of inequality and hierarchy.

Whilst differentiating the Australian situation as distinct from European experiences which have received attention from Unions and mainstream political parties, Tweedie (2013: 298) usefully highlights lack of statutory definition and subsequent control issues for the employee as key to defining precarious work, which is also observed as not necessarily short-term. This is congruent with the nature of the UK institute's adjunct tutors who currently receive extended fixed term contracts, dependent on yearly student numbers (although negotiations are in place to review conditions). Similarly, in the Middle Eastern institution studied, adjunct tutors are employed on a yearly basis. In both cases terms for adjunct staff are quite different to those on more permanent contractual arrangements. Tweedie also points out that this is not an insignificant issue, with an estimated 50% of university teaching performed in Australia by casual staff (citing May et al, 2011: 188).

Brown et al (2010) acknowledge the major issue of casualization of university teaching, reporting on the "flexibilized factory" and recent Australian debates on rationalisation and managerialism in the

system. Their study recognizes a divide mirrored in the wider economy of a gulf between a relatively secure manager class and growing numbers of casual workers, albeit highly educated professionals, and point to the gendered nature of this division. Brown et al cite the Bradley Report (Bradley et al, 2008: 23, 71) which stated that 'sessional staff experience income insecurity, workloads beyond their paid hours, and feelings of isolation from the university community'.

Bryson (2004) correctly predicted an increase in the marketisation of HE for the UK in the wake of US developments. Casual teaching in higher education in the UK has entered the mainstream political landscape; with e.g. Chakraborty and Weale (2016) discussing an academic "Sports Direct" model in *The Guardian* and campaigning by Unions (see also UCU annual report 2016-7). Whilst the Employers Association are reported as requiring necessary flexibility to cover research leave and variable student enrolments, and many of our respondents highlighted a wish for flexible work dependent upon personal circumstances, the effect on identity of being an adjunct was reported by many of our interviewees.

Academic identity

Since Alvesson and Wilmott (2002: 621) posited that identity regulation is a "significant, neglected and increasingly important modality of organizational control", identity research, particularly in times of institutional change, has continued as a rich facet for organizational studies, of which only a small sample can be reported here. Their comments on workplace turbulence show how individuals exert agency to adapt contingently in times of difficulty or change. Particularly resonant for studies on changing academic identities are their comments that: "knowledge-intensive work, especially in the professional service sector, spawns conflicting loyalties between professional affiliation and organizational responsibility" (2002: 623). For adjunct staff, who may take fractional contracts as part of a wider portfolio, and who may be cut off from elements of organizational decision making, and indeed immersed organizational life, this represents a particular challenge. This was reported by Brown (2006: 35) who quotes respondent 'Molly':

Well you're not a real staff member, you're not at staff meetings, you're not aware of what is happening in the university in a broader sense ... You're just picked up the week before the semester starts and dropped when the semester ends.

Whilst both sets of adjunct participants in this study reported similar disjuncting experiences to those above, tensions around conflicting loyalties between personal perceptions of value and reputation, individual identities and organizational duties expected by others appear to be exacerbated in relation to developing managerialism and task measurement in Higher Education in the UK. For example, Berg et al. (2013:383) write about how, of late, '...private sector practices of accountability, audit, control and surveillance have proliferated in the public sector'. Additionally, Knights and Clarke (2014: 339) discuss recent proliferations in externally imposed institutional audit footprints in the UK, such as accreditation, national student satisfaction surveys, league tables and quality assessments. Studies on these audit cultures, and changes to academic management approaches have highlighted academic mistrust and professional unfulfilled selves (e.g. Goolnik, 2012: 19), whilst Clarke and Knights (2015:15) posit that academics present compliant rather than resistant selves in such a performance environment. It has been reported that academics are concerning themselves more with the organizational aspects of how tutoring is delivered (see, for example, Hinings, 2005; Noordegraaf, 2007). For the Middle Eastern respondents in our study, by contrast, both adjuncts and tenured faculty were more concerned about traditional output metrics, such as building research profiles, safeguarding student employment prospects and individual course feedback from students. In this sense, digital presence here was seen as a welcome benefit to pedagogy and a useful but not essential addition to an academic skill portfolio rather than an end in its own right.

2 METHODOLOGY

Research procedure and data sources

Sampling

We heard from both adjuncts and staff with permanent or substantive roles and from two business school contexts - one in the UK embracing a principally digital locus, and the other, a middle east institution, which though relatively "new" in University terms has adopted a traditional US model to

foster speed towards teaching and research excellence. All names of respondents have been changed to ensure anonymity.

Interviews

We undertook a series of interviews lasting between 30 mins and an hour, with a series of questions below, semi-structured to allow respondents time and space to develop their own narratives. Participants were given the questions in advance to give them time and space to consider their responses, and given the potentially personal nature of some of the information, offer narratives that they were comfortable with.

With the research heading of "What is academic identity within an increasingly digital environment?" the following sub-questions were asked of participants:

- *How may any policy changes in student support affect your academic profile (teaching, research, consultancy, external engagements, manager, and/or administrator)?*
- *What changes are happening in your communities of practice as an academic supporting your students and how will they impact upon you?*
- *How would you describe yourself in terms of your academic role and identity?*
- *Do you need to learn/ unlearn any processes in an increasingly digital environment of student support?*
- *Are your professional values as an academic changing or evolving in this increasingly digital student support environment?*

Whilst the questions had a focus on technology and digital pedagogy the emphasis of respondents tended to be channeled along their varying status as faculty or adjuncts, the level of security felt about their contractual status and what other specialization they might bring to their role, e.g. technological know-how, industry experience, external contacts and pastoral skills.

We asked interviewees to bring around half a dozen photographs along with a short text that portrayed for them what it meant to be an academic in their environment as an eliciting tool. These were used as a reference point to illuminate and portray further self-reflection on respondents' academic identity. The inclusion of respondents' own photographic images and the way they chose to represent aspects of their academic role provided interesting findings in themselves as well as helping individuals who may not find it easy to consider their different professional identities reflexively.

For example, some respondents showed themselves in different environments, others depicted their working tools, or perhaps workplace posters from their offices and other organizational symbols. Barthes (2012 p76) usefully categorizes two voices in photography, the banal (the everyday) and the singularity (why we might chose to record), hence by photographing aspects of their academic role respondents could more easily morph from actor to spectator and listen to their voice from the outside rather than necessarily an inward perspective. It was also useful to see what they chose to signify through photograph and, often accompanying metaphorical description of the images (see also Rorty 1991: p13). As suggested by Luvera (2010, p.238) involving the participant in the photograph provides an active role that makes subject *and* co-creator; he also discusses how this reinstates an equality of power in photography; using this format in an interview scenario has similar applicability, helping participants direct the study to better hear their narratives.

Data Analysis

Data analysis of the interview transcripts was undertaken in three steps. Open coding was used initially, as per principles developed by Glazer and Strauss (1999). Authors coded inductively

individually in the first instance, themes were then mutually agreed, and a shortlist established, with those decided upon then analyzed through Nvivo11. These themes were then mapped to relevant bodies of literature.

Five other agreed key codes emerged (with sub headings)- *competition and collaboration in Higher Education, culture in Higher Education, financial and cost orientations, student orientation and technology in practice*. However, what developed in the interviews was an overarching preoccupation with the inextricable pairing of adjunct and faculty within Higher Education cultures, so it was decided to focus on this linking theme here, bringing in supporting evidence from other themes where illustrative and appropriate.

RESULTS

Theoretical Approach

This current project seeks to build on previous research by establishing the extent to which academic identity changes in a digital environment, or is intertwined with contractual status or whether this could be different in an alternative cultural scenario. Traditional ideas of academic identity and associated ways of working have been challenged, not least by recent changes in the university environment (Collins, 2013) and the introduction of online ways of working that alter customary collegiate cultures.

The purpose of this article is therefore to understand the lived experiences of adjuncts and how identity might be impacted by digital strategies. More generally, we were interested in gaining more understanding of complexity: we highlight firstly the tensions and mutually beneficial collaborations between the roles of faculty and adjuncts as highlighted by digital evolution, and secondly we uncover how agency and experience affects individual perceptions as reported in the interview arena.

By including a partly auto-ethnographical narrative approach we seek to question the 'rational' foundations of learning and teaching practices enabling a critical examination when working in an international and UK higher education context and to allow respondents greater flexibility in shaping their responses to questions.

2.1 A mutually necessary symbiosis?

As outlined above, this exploratory paper highlights initial threads relevant to HE culture and subcultures in the digital context, around adjuncts experiences below, although it is expected to expand as analysis continues.

2.1.1 Profiling of adjuncts

For the UK and Middle Eastern institutions, both tenured faculty and adjunct respondents highlighted the necessity of each other's roles and mutual benefits offered. Similar profiles of people attracted to adjunct work emerged from their personal narratives at both institutions; these included those wanting part-time work for caring responsibilities or semi-retirement, consultants seeking a blended or portfolio career and those needing to bolster income. There were also a number of "aspirational" adjuncts who wished to develop a more substantive academic role whilst another set wished to "give back" based on their own historically positive educational experiences. None of these groups were necessarily mutually exclusive.

While the insecurity of tenure gave rise to concerns in both institutions the flexibility and opportunity provided by the adjunct role was also equally celebrated by some:

"...it gives you lots of access to get involved in other things. So I've had access to work on different courses, I've been a critical reader, I've been a writer. I've been involved in writing some ... materials, I've written a MOOC, I've planned out some filming that's taken place. I get to work with the tutors and do some training.... So it's access to a lot of these extra bits I quite like.... I enjoy it, I still enjoy it. But I really get a lot out of some of the extras that have come along and the ability to get involved in other areas. ...I've got a good 25% that's some nice, involved things that I enjoy doing and I enjoy taking different angles on". (Ben, UK)

"...I was able to join the faculty teaching and learning certificate course...and I was not discriminated upon because I wasn't full time, which was very nice. So I was able to see that the types of practices I was using in the classroom and things I was doing with my students were on target..." (Carly, ME)

For both institutions, comments from faculty acknowledged the contributions of adjunct staff. Some of these were tinged with regret at how much they were relied upon to cover flexibility in student numbers, others emphasised how much *"we do need them"* (Raisa, ME). In the Middle East in particular, up to date industry knowledge and digital expertise were recognised as much needed benefits of the adjunct role that could not necessarily be easily offered by a long-serving permanent faculty member.

Particular emphasis was given from a variety of UK respondents to adjunct skills in helping support students through a digital route in recognition of the *"cognitive skills needed to process all of that information"* (James, UK) and in thinking critically rather than the skim reading that was reported from online learning sessions. Adjuncts saw their role as a *"bridge"* (James, UK) to learning in a digital environment, and all parties talked about the value of the adjunct as able to fill the gaps in the system. Jane, James and Ben all talked extensively about the additional *"bits"* of online work they had appreciated doing as an adjunct, and how they, their institution and students had benefited. For UK faculty, one respondent (Jessica) reported how she was better able to respond to student additional requests for support using an online platform, as an adjunct would be more willing to participate at short notice when the work could be done flexibly from home.

2.1.2 Differentiation equals autonomy

What emerged as different in the experiences of the UK versus Middle Eastern adjuncts was their value to the institution where rarity of expertise was present. In the UK, where all adjuncts interviewed were recruited for their ability to thrive in a distance learning and digital environment, the required skills were somewhat taken for granted and subject to managerial control and standardisation through both teaching medium (e.g. online or face to face) and pedagogy, adjuncts were assumed to be self-starters in this medium. In the Middle East with the majority of teaching being undertaken in a traditional face to face setting, those adjuncts (and full time faculty) who offered digital expertise to the University were particularly valued for it and reported well-being from autonomy:

"I'm the only faculty who teaches it, and so maybe that's also where the autonomy comes in. And so I can really do with it what I want, and for that matter, I can even change the learning objectives if I go through the proper procedures and the proper process. And then the other two courses that I teach are courses that I developed. Nobody else teaches them, I've developed them from scratch, and so yes, complete and... I mean, yes, complete and total autonomy for all intents and purposes..." (Barbara, ME).

The UK University had recently attempted to change traditional bonds between student and academic in order to increase flexibility and personal choice of tutorial attendance; additional timetable provisions were made to the online platform. The unintended consequence of splitting these elements (online, face to face) from marking responsibilities impacted in that tutors felt a loss of integration with their own students' full learning experience as students could choose to attend any other tutors event across all venues. Respondents reported pedagogic control also diminished with the need for standardisation of module materials and tutorial activities resulting from this institutional strategy for teaching and learning.

University changes *"meant I have to change the way that I deliver. ... I find that, because I'm no longer tutoring my students exclusively, I'm having to restrict what I'm doing...it's restricted it to be honest because you just got to adhere to what is being given to you and what's been given to the students"* (Jack, UK).

Adjuncts reported also having to be more *"functional"* (Sarah), and made remarks such as where you *"just come in and deliver a set... like a trainer"* (Sarah) if different students rather than their own were present at each tutorial. Respondents were either neutral to this, or commented that they were just adapting as the institution wanted them to, although some reported reduced affinity if they would not necessarily see the student again. However, where participants had previously received personal validation from their expertise in pastoral care to their own students, this had been curtailed through standardisation, and led to a loss of the adjuncts' own value in the pastoral skills that accompanied their academic expertise. A loss was felt in terms of specialisation and hence autonomy:

"I had such a rapport with my students, and I prided myself on that, it's been hard, it's like breaking the umbilical cord as it were..." (Alison, UK)

This change in the Tutor role had a direct impact on participants' belief in the value of their role. When asked about their academic identity in a digitized University a number of respondents highlighted fears of being faceless, going online and losing their linked identity with a student was reported by one, and future fears of being just a marker were raised by another.

For UK based faculty, perceptions of reduced bonding between student and tutor were also remarked upon, and fears around reduced retention as a result were articulated. (It should be noted that since these interviews were undertaken, management in the UK HEI have reversed this part of the policy.) Whilst faculty expected digital expertise as a standard part of the adjunct profile in the UK respondents surveyed, adjuncts displaying particular digital skills in new or innovative tools were remarked upon by name as leaders in this sphere by their faculty colleagues.

2.1.3 *The managerialism continuum*

The importance of autonomy in the adjunct and faculty roles was acknowledged, however a more digitized learning environment and moves to standardisation of the student experience tended to evolve alongside increasing managerialism. In a more traditional University environment space for autonomous opportunities existed, both in face to face and online environments, but these became diluted in a panopticon (Slade and Prinsloo 2013: 3) of an increasingly digitised learning environment and so impacted on individuals academic identity.

The move to managerialism was evidenced by such comments as:

"I'm noticing the relationship with my ... manager is changing a lot. It used to be very much that our chats were about development and about how to improve things and sharing best practice. Now it all seems to be all about administration and solving problems. So the dynamic has very much changed. In that, I don't feel like I've got a manager anymore, I've got somebody that is an administrator that's giving me jobs to do. So that's a definite change in the dynamic there" (Ben, UK).

Whilst all respondents in the face to face institution noted the potential impact of international trends to managerialism in the wider University sector, they also saw opportunity to focus on their core aspects of their role that they felt were most important and they did not see a slide to a managerial / audit culture as inevitable:

"And therefore from an identity point of view, I'm in the people business, I'm in the people development business, and as long as I'm in the people interaction business I'll survive. But as soon as I get stuck into a role where I'm just an administrator with no access to people or just a researcher with we've got to do some statistical package of social sciences rubbish, then I'm not going to be happy" (Jack ME).

However, in the Middle East any move towards digitisation as a medium for teaching did not feature as a priority for tenured academics of some seniority and professional prestige, who perceived this work as a distraction and taking away from the core identity of research and traditional teaching

"...learning new technologies for teaching because it's like, you know well, you know, why should I invest in that, I need to invest in my research." (Jack, ME).

For these individuals their seniority afforded them a full autonomy and they were less affected than less senior faculty and adjuncts who such work falls to, whether seen as a welcome opportunity in some cases or a necessary burden in others. In the UK the faculty position was quite similar in some respects, having security of a permanent role made these respondents less worried about where they would spend their teaching time, however, they were aware of the need to invest in training to maintain digital skills. Where they did raise concerns was around a *"drift toward managerial or administrative rather than teaching time"* (Jessica, UK) as automation and digital by default changed some aspects of their role.

3 DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH, ACKNOWLEDGED BOUNDARIES AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

There was evidence that imposed changes from increased managerialism and less academic autonomy were seen as unavoidable in the UK University with both the digital strategy and institutional and personal responses to government policies; coping strategies for individuals tended to focus on

the need for acceptance and moving forward as their roles develop. All UK participants raised a certain amount of regret at changes, despite compliance to institutional strategy as illustrated by the quote below:

"No I just think it's a process of change and change management, I definitely got to get my head round the fact that, the old way of doing things is never going to happen again and I just miss that. It's just I suppose in a years' time I'll have got used to this new way of doing things." (Ben, UK).

In the Middle East by contrast, respondents did not feel bound to a digital educative outlook, reporting a varied and "dynamic" (Jack, ME) culture where individuals could evolve in teaching online or not as per personal preference as academics. What is clear for both institutions is that negotiated status and role meanings, "discursive and reflexive processes of identity construction and regulation within work organizations", as reported by Alvesson and Wilmott (2002: 621) are a continual part of higher education cultures and working life.

Whilst this piece of work represents only a snapshot of early findings from this study, and the group intend to examine other similarities and differences between academic perspectives and lived experiences across the two institutions as per the themes outlined above, limitations would include that only two institutions were investigated. Directions for future research and expansions to the study might include another perspective, or longitudinal data from further interviews as the project and associated themes are further developed

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