"FROZEN MOMENTS" IN THE DIGITISATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION TEACHING - SELF PHOTOGRAPHY AS A CRITICAL ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH TO EVALUATE ACADEMIC IDENTITIES IN A CROSS CULTURAL SETTING

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Abstract

This study seeks to understand the role of self- photography in enabling academics to create a self-narrative and use this to reflect on their evolving academic identity in an increasingly digitized locus of teaching and learning. Using photographs taken by the participants of themselves in a context which they believe epitomizes their academic identity, we engaged in in-depth interviews to discuss what photographs mean in explaining work related roles. This paper explores lecturers' narratives of change and fluid academic selves presented in discussion on the performance space of the online arena and the enabling power that self- photography can have in shaping in depth discussions. Participants were from two HEIs (UK and Middle East based) at different points on a digitization continuum with varying interpretations of the importance of this medium to pedagogic design and delivery.

Keywords: Photographic ethnography, academic identity, digitisation, higher education.

1 INTRODUCTION

A key objective was to explore differences between teaching models that used digital as integrated into the curriculum with online as a complement to traditional teaching materials. The aim was to use self-photography within an ethnographic framework to surface shared and differing experiences between participants with a particular focus upon adaptations to academic identity. Historically, early ethnographic visual documentaries focused on an ontological realism. However, these views have now developed to include a move from a reality shaped by definitive judgements on context and whether the context is deserving of observation. Ethnography now links to a socially constructed paradigm and enables the use of an interpretive methodology. Rose, (2001, p.5) defined the paradigm shift that has made the use of visual methods a credible approach of studying social construction of 'lives' through 'living' as a "cultural turn".

As the ethnographic narrative takes form we are transported from fact and realism to a socially constructed meaning shaped by understanding between the photographer and ethnographer. As reflected by Barthes (2000:27-8) "to recognise the studium is inevitably to encounter the photographer's intention, to enter into harmony with them, to approve or disapprove of them, but always to understand them, to argue them within myself, for culture (from which the studium derives) is a contract arrived at between creators and consumers". In this instance, the use of self-photography enables researchers and respondents to cohabit both creator and consumer roles in shared space.

The behavior of different cultural groups, both organizational and national, is informed by the way in which they make sense of their world. Bryman (2001) views ethnography as a creative process which involves experiencing, interpreting and understanding cultures. Being focused on the study of culture and descriptions thereof it is perhaps logical to assume that ethnographic descriptions are creative journeys which allow the researcher to place themselves in the world of their participants in order to further collaborative discussions. Rose (2001) posits that there is an increase in researching these cultural constructions as a primary focus and as such they are becoming increasingly validated in the research field.

There is an increased interest in the way photographs can elicit information, evoke thoughts and memories or open up opportunities to explore experience and meaning-making (Harper, 2002). Visual documentation can help the researcher achieve an informed depth of understanding (Cova and Pace (2006), and has also played a role within the field of management and organisational research. Bell and

Davidson (2013) proposed the use of a more theoretically informed approach to visual research and concluded that the evidence of theory in the methodology supports a more reflexive approach allowing an understanding of what the images may mean in conjunction with an understanding of the causes behind this. For these reasons this study has utilised a theoretical approach in conjunction with sense-making to explore research questions.

This paper therefore considers the higher education sector through an ethnographic lens as we strive to understand changes to education using self –photography as a means of exploring academic identity.

2　METHOD AND APPROACH

We sampled the views and lived experiences of eighteen teaching staff working in two Business faculties. The UK institution is a distance learning provider with increasing focus on digital learning, whilst the Middle Eastern Institution was campus-based with a largely traditional face to face teaching model. Respondents have been anonymized and comprised a mix of permanent Faculty staff and those on adjunct contracts. In an attempt to co-create knowledge with participants, we asked them to prepare a series of photographs with metaphoric text-based descriptions (Rorty, 1991) used as an elicitation tool during the subsequent interview. Using a semi-auto- ethnographic approach enabled interviewees to shape the terms and text of semi-structured interviews, whilst also providing rich narratives of "thick" data (Geertz, 1973) which develops a layer of authenticity and criticality (Golden-Biddle and Locke, 1993).

Our ethnographic methodology involved fieldwork using participant observation and in situ interviews and this we combined with photography, requesting participants to take images of themselves prior to the interview situation to epitomize their workplace identity. This was not a collaborative approach, but rather the participant took their images independent of the researcher. Later, at the interview stage the images and their authenticity as a representation of them in their workplace was discussed. This was done in contrast to Pink (2007) who recommends a collaborative approach, but this decision was taken to allow the participants time to reflect on their identity prior to discussing this at the interview stage. The researchers also took images of the workplaces and discussed their own understanding of the meaning they derived from these images both as a research group and with the participants on an individual basis.

It was noted that a number of respondents commented on the positive level of engagement with the project that was engendered by taking photographs in advance of in-depth interviews. This had the dual effect of potentially increasing response rate and giving participants the opportunity to undertake more active reflection on their roles. They reported reflexive experiences and greater depth of personal narrative. This gave them the time to consider their ideas via photographs allowing a self-directed "sharing" and offered some benefits typically associated with self-ethnographical techniques. The individual takes a photo and this signifies personal meaning, but when it is discussed with the researchers in a collaborative way it becomes a shared socially constructed meaning as it becomes situated within organizational and subsequent wider societal context (Mills, 2000, p.186).

The camera can be used as a tool for observation, a stimulus for ideas or a way of illustrating and presenting results. The image taken captures the complexity of the moment and freezes it in time and provides practical assistance throughout the research process. This allows the participant to reflect on the image and then move on to discuss in the final phases of synthesis and analysis (Collier and Collier, 1986). This image taking of simple digital photographs became artefacts of discussion, exchanges and negotiation concurring with Pink (2007). It was noted that some respondents provided simple and literal representations of either themselves engaged with teaching, or their teaching artefacts, (e.g. laptop, desk or self at whiteboard). Other responses were deliberately constructed and composed metaphorical allegories of what teaching meant to them (one respondent took a photograph of their car, as an expression of professional status and independence.) In this way, participant involvement in the photo makes for an active role of subject and co-creator (Luvera, 2010). Choices of where and how they composed self- images reflected their individual academic roles as they saw them, allowing them to move from actor to spectator, and from internal to external perspectives in a dialectical way.

We went into the research context, asking questions as recommended by Wolcott (2009): i.e. "What is going on here?", "How do things happen as they do?" The responses to these questions helped inform our more detailed research questions and then guided the focus of our analysis. We then went on to identify broad themes which could then be refined into specific categories. We used digital photography to document the physical environment and allow participants to place themselves in that

environment in a way that described their workplace identity allowing others to,' "feel imagine and recognize " their "human condition" (Belk & Kozinets,(2005; p.132), effectively becoming a 'fly on the wall' in terms of methodology. As part of the interview, we also asked participants to discuss physical artefacts in the photos and how they chose to include these and how they derived meaning from them. This visual recording of the artefacts and their meaning in these cultural and specific contexts has given authenticity to the findings (Schembri and Boyle, 2011). This was a context relevant situation where we used an iterative process as we refined the ethnographic knowledge we gained. This confirmed understanding, partially validating our methodology through acceptance as representative by participants.

3   FINDINGS

Whilst the discussions enabled the exploration of shared and different experiences, this early paper focusses on the similarities raised by participants. These have been anonymized, due to the often sensitive personal narratives invoked, and are labelled respectively as UK or UAE together with a number. As we have not sought to compare respondents on various characteristics e.g. gender, type of contract, at this stage in collating similarities, the decision was made not to identify other than by location.

Key themes emerging from similar experiences included: flexibility and culture change in universities, online pedagogy, and promoting critical thinking for students.

3.1   Flexibility and culture change in universities

All respondents reported increased ability to work with more students due to the development of digital platforms, which was often directly evidenced through tangibles such as library access as well as helping manage class sizes and resources. The use of photographs produced deeper insights into parallel evolutions such as a more student centred approach. One way evidenced was the development of teaching through the enablement of student extended roles, for example, as leaders in collaborative online groups. New media in themselves were also seen as changing pedagogy, such as by UAE 03 who discussed how students liked "cool visualisations" and responded to the new media, where "they learned so much more".

This also provoked respondents own reflections on how a digital environment impacted their teaching style, e.g. UAE 02 reported being hesitant of media changes from the classroom to blended teaching initially, but "came to shift proudly from being [an]…authority…to being a mentor….I really feel happy about that". They similarly recorded an increasing need for currency with cultural memes to be part of student discussions: "I have to keep up with *Game of Thrones*" (UAE 02), although it was not defined whether the need to be culturally relevant was part of a fast paced digital evolution per se, or also a reflection on higher education cultures becoming more student focussed.

All respondents expressed this latter need for flexibility in approach and raised changing cultures in academia. Greater student numbers and digitisation also meant increased administration, although in the UK this was more closely associated with targets for student retention and progression. Digitisation was seen by all respondents as about "supporting students….about challenging them, and…finding new ways to do that…" (UAE04) and the same learning outcomes were present, just via different vehicles. Concerns were raised about greater numbers and understanding the lack of cues from silent/passive students in the online environment e.g. (UK05) who wanted to preserve smaller group relationships:

> "*I'm this one special person for that person doing the module, but they can be just one in 100 to me at any one time. And it's how do I make sure that all of those 100 are just as important…when I'm working in a digital environment and I may have very, very limited contact….*"

Participants expressed gratitude for specialist support with the increased burden of student administration and changed behaviours, particularly for students with complex problems. This was particularly because students were felt to respond less in a digital environment, "really incredibly frustrating when it goes completely silent…didn't happen as much before we were digital, and whether

that is a reflection of people changing behaviour…" (UK 05).Where the photographs allowed explorations of complexity and personal feeling was through comments such as one reporting it was "comforting" to access dedicated support (UK 02) and not be alone with a student in difficulty or a more complex task setting. Similarly, this flexibility came out in discussion of the changing hours context in the UK, with one being texted after midnight with an assignment problem, "fortunately, I'm not the early to bed type…." (UK 02). In this instance, the tutor reported that the role was just about being "a voice of calm". The same respondent also highlighted a student "expecting an instant answer almost" and was grateful for institutional support available

3.2   Online Pedagogy

Ethnographic methods encouraged detailed discussion around tensions between tutors frustration with learners seemingly short attention span and requirement for short nuggets of text and an underlying discomfort of tutors own technological abilities in an increasingly digital space. All reported the need to keep up with new technologies in teaching and felt a loss of traditional texts and the way the internet shaped student interaction and course immersion. They appreciated and understood but at times resented the constant and ongoing investment in IT skills required. It was recognised that the vehicle of delivery shaped the pedagogy with writing for the web needing to be in discrete, compact chunks: e.g.

> *"Information they get today is from the internet. Unfortunately they don't <u>read</u>, [respondent's emphasis] but they do read on the internet…." (UAE 02)*

> *"Give them too much reading, it's like pulling hen's teeth…there's no lengthy text [on the internet] their attention span…" (UAE 06)*

> *"…digital…is the future and I'm just one of these old crusties who go, oh gosh do I have to learn all that…yes I do….I've addressed it…." (UAE 05)*

This final respondent also reported struggling with student use of media in their classroom, and having to learn to cope with students using phones. They had tackled a fear of less skills than their students by setting up WhatsApp groups with former students to keep in touch and gain social networking skills in a non-performative environment.

Another respondent commented on how students were no longer comfortable with writing in exams after being used to short pieces based on internet learning and raised questions of how to tackle this in the institution

3.3   Promoting Critical thinking for students in a digital sphere

The above discussions led into lecturers' awareness of the challenges of getting students to think critically. Photographs allowed participants to explore the appearance of additional complexity in the digital environment, e.g. "You want them to become self-learners and do everything on the computer, they get lost… so it is cultural...teaching methods need to change first…." (UAE 02). They realised one of the key challenges of the online context was to develop analysis skills and evaluation in new ways and via non-traditional media. It was also felt that the digital environment gave students "more data and less information" and that "the cognition of what's out there is less" (UK 01). Students were perceived to have become overwhelmed, and to be "bombarded". Tutors reported needing to act as a "bridge" between information and active student learning. (UK 01) The web was recognised as providing good sources for broad learning, but not necessarily the T-shaped learning (see e.g. Conley et al, 2017) and the depth provided in traditional textbooks required for a degree. MOOCs were perceived to have this "lightweight quality" as "people only do it for a week because then they get bored and go and play at something else" (UK 01). Digitisation for some respondents had also accompanied a greater reliance on a case study approach where gaps in student interaction were reported, with "not getting a feeling…produces real cognition" being one person's reflection. Students were perceived to learn more where they were put into a real-life situation.

Lack of criticality in the digital sphere was seen as a bigger problem at the introductory levels, and the need for 'step by step' assistance for entrants. It was acknowledged that skills development was part

of the student journey: "Part of it may depend on the student population, the maturity of the student population. I teach mostly third and fourth year students, and no problem at all" (UAE 03). Part of this related to another common thread of having to be a 'digital parent' (UK 02, UK 03) for some introductory students. One way this was explored in interviews was how to define and set student expectations of the boundary of "academic" support whilst drawing upon specialist skills holders as required, e.g. IT or counselling. This also manifested in the wider problem of students reluctance to speak on online platforms during their introductory modules. One wry response from UK 03 in relation to online for introductory teaching was: "I've yet to have a tutorial where somebody's mic *does* work!" In this situation tutors felt it was just their voices, and that if students just wanted to listen, then a lecture would work better, so they were adapting materials to account for this. In this way tutors missed their face to face environments where students "open to you, they warm to you", and they regretted the change of dynamic. One respondent UK03 referred to "breaking the umbilical cord" from past student relationships with new ways of working.

All expressed how digital fixed and formatted learning but some felt it was also more time consuming for teachers than might be anticipated. Further exploration here surfaced the skills required, whether tutors were writing their own web materials or using standardised, detailed offerings provided by the institution. UAE (02) commented that online work means "every ten minutes of the course is written out", rather than being more fluid in a traditional classroom environment. This concurred with UK03 who reported how things were more formalised, "more official" in this new environment, they saw this as part of the race to keep current when the curriculum could be out of date very quickly. Where standardised materials were provided, it was felt that tutors might lose the richness of individual academics contributing particular skills and interests. UK 02 reported having to be 'more resilient' in a distant online environment as students now fired off comments, and the tone was often "not the kindest". They wanted to evolve an etiquette without taking away the "fun and instantaneous nature" from the quick fire environment. Face to face enabled cues to handle student behaviours.

UK 06 reported a gap between teachers' perspectives and university management assumptions that face to face and digital were equivalent; as a tutor they considered that "they're different and I think they've both got their place." This person also considered that online leant itself in that way to more of a lecture than tutorial format. UK07 discussed ongoing concerns about how long online work took to set up on one module, using the metaphor that they were "feeling a little bit like, thrown to the wolves, on this particular one because there is this extra work to get this up….somebody had looked at the resources…and just made the assumption that it was purely transferable."

4   CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Findings in the headings above proved a useful way to explore similarities in experiences and reflections between two disparate cohorts. The second phase of analysis is to look at differences raised for working in online environments and the impact on academic identity between the two institutional cultures. What the shared experiences have illustrated is comparative experiences of required flexibility and changing student behaviours, for example, the need for tutors to move from giver of knowledge to bridging information to understanding and help students find skills and a path through a forest of information.

Discussion of photos allowed participants to verbalise emotions. With changing identities online creating emotive and affective narratives, the methodology of self-photography was deemed to be appropriate and lent itself to the requirements of a reflexive subject matter, robust in providing the depth and breadth of information we were seeking.   It is perceived that we gained greater insights and more reflective and emotional responses than we might otherwise have garnered form other techniques. Additionally we would recommend the use of self- photography before interviews and focus groups as a means of engaging the respondents and increasing the participant rate.

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