Teaching in the time of COVID-19: a timescape of online tutors’ lived experiences

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Abstract

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The Covid-19 pandemic dramatically altered the Higher Education teaching and learning experience, as staff and students alike pivoted to online environments. As HEIs quickly responded and moved online, academic staff rushed to support students and ensure continuity of quality learning and teaching. The impact of such changes and the conditions of extreme work on staff motivations and resilience continues to emerge. We reflect on experiences and emotional responses during the lockdown in light of our own identities as teachers. Will HE return fully to long-established routines, or are more permanent changes afoot, as we emerge blinking into the sun?
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The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically altered the Higher Education (HE) teaching and learning experience, as staff and students alike pivoted to online environments. As HEIs quickly responded to the need to move operations online, academic staff rushed to support students and ensure continuity of quality learning and teaching.

The impact of such changes and the conditions of extreme work on staff behaviours, motivations and resilience continues to emerge. We reflect on our experiences and emotional responses while considering the lockdown situation in light of our own identities as teachers in Higher Education. We do not yet know whether these processes have resulted in temporary identities or more permanent shifts. Will the Higher Education sector return fully to long-established ways of being and working, or are more permanent changes afoot, as we emerge blinking into the sun?

Introduction

We aim to build on our learning of academic identity shifts to underpin an evolving management ethos in the post pandemic setting. Emotional experiences are often positioned as one of the key tenets of academic investigations on identity work. They are often labelled as ‘fraught’ and challenging with Winkler (2018:124) highlighting important descriptors of fear, anxiety, doubt, and frustration. These are valid and long-standing academic discourses for the forging of identities; however, this paper considers that difficulty, angst and even heartbreak are not always at the centre of such processes as often portrayed in the literature.

Our study on how COVID-19 provided conditions for rapid repointing of academic selves shows many directions of travel. Using reflective narratives and framing images, we demonstrate how some of our tutor cohort found lockdown challenging, or damaging, but others welcomed the becoming of alternative selves through new independence, responsibility and release from tired teaching routines and managerialism. In these cases, positive identity framings gradually emerged, encouraging the development of future resilience.

For ease of reporting we have characterised the timescape of teaching in the pandemic into four stages which are; pre-pandemic identities, reflections on living through the early weeks (when our study took place), acceptance of new ways of being and working, and future plans.

Background

Higher Education institutions with existing blended teaching capabilities were well placed to ‘pivot’ to the online-only driven environment of the pandemic (Batty and Hall, 2020). However, even tutors experienced in distance pedagogy underwent dramatic role intensifications and challenges. Although the University in our case study was a leader in distance education and well placed to respond to the impact COVID had on teaching; tutors still had to ‘bricolage’ a mix of existing technologies and practices to respond to rapid change, for example within assessment strategies and supporting students’ concerns. We wanted to capture emotions, responses and breakthroughs in academic proactivity and productivity and explore a range of tutor responses in order to make recommendations for a ‘better normal’ (Schleicher, 2020) during recovery across the Higher Education sector.

Whilst study has previously been undertaken on variables of time and space in extreme work scenarios (e.g., Bozkurt, 2015) noting both emotional labour and the threats and opportunities thrown up in sudden workplace change. The pivots to online environments have provoked a great deal of academic and media comment and reflection. Some of these contributions highlight existing inequalities of opportunity, such as debates around “the pandemic and the female academic” (Minello, 2020). Others have noted that emotional or intense work can often accrue professional
dignity to workers (Bolton and Boyd, 2003), and “extreme work may become a perk of the job despite entailing the intensification of work” (Bozkurt, 2015). Contributors within the literature note different responses to the stressors of extreme life and work including humour, creative time management practices and a focus on looking after mental health, which are all highly relevant to pandemic circumstances.

Rapidly moving workplaces to a digital, immaterial place also created a sense of liminality (Beech, 2011) and ideas of transition as different workplace selves became a possibility for tutors. Our study also incorporated compatible ideas around digital academic identity which have become a recognised field of scholarship. Collins et al (2020) found that teaching in a digital world put emphasis on ‘possible selves’ and who we might become as digital skills become ever more ‘human’ and more complex. Pandemic extreme work also offered an opportunity to consider seminal texts in new lights, such as how Goffman’s (1956) Presentation of Self in Everyday Life might be considered when the self presents in differing and digital ways, and everyday life is anything but.

This paper therefore explores outcomes of changed routines, new independence, and enforced autonomy due to lack of communication with particular reference to changing towards the ‘better normal’ hybrid model.

**Approach**

Our research design uses photographic elicitation methods to explore images of material artefacts taken by digital teachers to make sense of evolving identity formations in adopting digital workspaces. Participants included a range of tutors teaching Business and Law (UG and PG) who were asked to produce reflective narratives with accompanying relevant images. They described their practices and emotions as lived experiences related to their academic work. Using key insights from Glover et al (2018) we designated three categories as a framework for their responses, these were: Perceptions/elasticity of time, Precarity/security of work and Communications. We then used content analysis to draw insights across the 3 themes.

This methodology offered understanding into comparative perceptions of physical and online teaching spaces, unpicking and examining tensions between physical and digital ‘embodiment’. We promoted the images as the principle focus to maximise visibility of layers of emotion that were captured. The free text alongside the images placed priority on the co-creation element and reflective practice to unveil emotional rather than operational aspects of the complete shift online from blended learning. We wanted participants to use images to capture everyday encounters that had value to them (Kelly, 2020), which were focused on quick and often direct elements of the everyday which elicited a reaction (Pyyry, 2019).

The researchers worked as “co-authors in the creative dialogical process of learning” (Cunliffe, 2002, p.47). To achieve this, the reflective images and accompanying narratives were reviewed independently. Once the first reading was complete, the team met to negotiate the units of analysis that would create meaning. We then evolved a coding scheme, which was tested on one sample narrative. All texts were coded and tested for consistency before the final categories were analysed. Subsequently, the team jointly evaluated the narratives, classifying specific statements where they fitted the three headings of time, precarity and communications.

Initial readings resulted in all researchers noting that not all reflective narratives were of equal reflexivity and engagement with the task. In terms of the written task some respondents had clearly struggled with the need to centre the self in a reflexive account, producing instead descriptive type
analyses of lockdown events and changing work practices rather than their impact on identity work. Whilst these narratives were duly coded, they were set aside from discussion below. Similarly there was great variation between images that were solely factual snapshots (for example, of a laptop on a kitchen table) and others that were highly metaphorical (for example, a house of cards about to tumble).

We offer an analysis of three axes of teaching in the time of COVID, where a sample image and accompanying reflections from the participants is framed by our own analysis.

Results
We used three axes to structure results and analyse findings, they are Precarity and security, time, and communication.

Axis 1: Precarity and security
Our thematic analysis of the narratives and photographs provided by our sample of tutors explored feelings of precarity. Participants related this in terms of job security but also the far wider reaching concerns around the population’s health more generally. One participant submitted a photograph of her well-worn slippers as she felt the image communicated a sense of stillness, of a future “limited to looking out of my little office window” and that there was “no excuse to get out of the slippers” (Respondent 1).

Respondents noted a widespread feeling of anxiety in part resulting from the precarious situation we were all facing. It was felt that the pandemic had impacted all our lives in a myriad of ways from the micro to the macro. One tutor summarised this fear of the general situation as it played out: “You also had this appalling feeling at the early days of lock down as to whether you are marking your last assignment or the student might not be alive to read the feedback” (Respondent 2).

Respondents acknowledged, that initially, they found some solace in the distractions of an increased workload and the personal fulfilment of taking charge of student support to fill the gap caused by the perceived “silo thinking and lack of agility” from University management (Respondent 2).
However, while recognising the benefits of being in a position to support students in their studies and with wider pastoral worries, tutors’ attention later deviated to concerns for their own job and financial security with one choosing to illustrate this as a house of cards about to tumble. Many tutors commented on the heightened benefits of a mutually supportive relationship between tutor and their student group at this time:

"Students and tutors alike began to experience at first hand the VUCA model: volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity” and the participant cited Horney et al, 2010 (Respondent 3).

However, others noted this was in stark contrast to how they felt about the perceived lack of support from the university:

“Most of the time my students were far more supportive than my managers or indeed Faculty”. (Respondent 2).

For some tutors with a substantive role in practice or business, their tutoring role remained the stable element of their income. One tutor commented on their gratitude to be working for a distance learning HE provider in contrast to their other work as their “remaining commercial work evaporated overnight” (Respondent 3). However, others reflected on the potential impacts on the HE sector which was in part an outcome of the unfolding economic situation:

“I did however find myself wondering how secure my tutor contract was and how dispensable I might be if circumstances did change and less students could finance studies” (Respondent 4). (Source- http://etfovoice.ca/node/555)

Tutors tried to foresee the situation post pandemic and noted that there were, at this point in time, so many unknowns. For example, they questioned if economic conditions would restrain students from access to study. It was acknowledged that the sustained media attention on HE institutions, and indeed the education sector more generally, heightened the feelings of precarity. One commented on having raised concerns due to:

“all the scare stories which are coming from the press regarding admissions to Universities” (Respondent 5).

They also questioned future trends in the sector and if for example there would be a swing to more online learning at HE. There was an overall feeling that as an expert in online pedagogy they were better placed than many for future conditions:

“I felt incredibly secure financially, and confident that work would continue regardless of how long the pandemic lasted. I continue to reflect on how fortunate I have been over this period”. (Respondent 3), while another commented:
“I remind myself that we make our own futures and despite the uncertainty, I am well placed as a virtual teacher with (this university)… to brave this new world.” (Respondent 4).

There was also a recognition that the new normal would take time to unfold:

“It will take many years before traditional universities are able to openly embrace the complexity and nuances of online/distance learning” (Respondent 5).

As such respondents recognised and reflected on changing securities and re-examined their feelings toward precarious work. In this abruptly altered landscape many respondents were grateful to be experienced in distance HE provision. It was seen as a liminal time (Beech, 2011), the university itself had temporarily receded in importance, reinforcing the tutor and student bond.

**Axis 2: Perceptions/elasticity of Time**

A second clear theme we evaluated through the narratives was that of time. Expected markers and conventional perceptions of time, such as getting up, dressed, commuting, and attending offices and tutorials, disappeared and these rhythms became replaced by new sorts of days: “The ebb and flow of time seems to have changed…with adapting to new routines” (Respondent 4).

Respondents felt that time in general was paused, and this provided an opportunity to “test drive” (Respondent 3) different futures and stretch themselves in new ways. These included attempts to “clear the decks” (Respondents 6) of established routines and look at ways to adapt and change. This respondent went on to consider practical ways of managing their time during the pandemic including “maintaining boundaries between work and rest time” as they found it “hard to delineate when all hours are categorised as ‘being at home’”.

Some respondents reflected on the positives such as: “a less stressful lifestyle, provides a much healthier work-life balance” (Respondent 3). Others found it a mixed blessing where an initial feeling of positivity of “more time to get everything done” (Respondent 7) gave way after a few weeks to a sense that “time was running away from me and suddenly I didn’t complete everything on my daily ‘to-do’ list.” The respondent went on to comment “My time management skills had gone for a vacation”. Others chafed at an inability to manage their time with several respondents reporting feeling drained by endless days in front of a computer. One participant (1) noted that they had consciously sought to counteract this online fatigue by taking outdoor exercise. The image of the road conveyed both positive and negative emotions, health and immersion in nature, but also the endless road - to where?

However, increased workload was felt as a strong pull on respondents’ time, and the emotional response to this was mixed. One respondent recorded feeling “overwhelmed and ‘not good enough’ at times” (Respondent 8) in managing their own new workloads. They also reported the impact of

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students’ inability to manage time, and the resultant “extra workload and planning for me” in accommodating their needs via “individual learning plans”. In this theme, we see tutors exploring a liminal state where normal routines, and even usual measures of time itself, seemed to have paused. Many respondents clearly considered time in new ways, and how this might be an opportunity for proactive change.

Axis 3: Communication

The third axis of our thematic analysis of the narratives and images were issues around communication. These included communication with the University management and the tutors’ interaction with students. One tutor was deeply concerned about the communication concerning exams and tutorials with regard to the gap between existing assessment and tuition plans and any (un)necessary changes. One major incident that exemplifies the confusion and frustration was the poor timing of communication when exams, both face to face and online, were suddenly cancelled. Tutors summarised the confusion they felt:

“I didn’t anticipate the effective cancellation of all ...(online exams) as well. That single action created an avalanche of work…. (we were) notified that evening and over the weekend... We were not to communicate with students prior to their receipt of the university-wide email. At best, it was badly handled” (Respondent 3).

Emotional responses included anger at abandonment or poorly timed emails from the university that they felt undermined their status and created confusion, including assessment changes sent at 5pm on a Friday: “who else was going to be there for the students…!” (Respondent 1). This frustration was voiced by numerous respondents: “Direct line management through Faculties was invisible or at best inconsistent” (Respondent 2).

The issues of communication extended to concerns with line management whilst realising at the same time that those managers themselves were also under severe pressure. One respondent commented that he made a decision “not to ask questions that could not be answered, but rather reciprocate [assist] module teams with whatever support I could offer. It has been a period of frustration due to a lack of information and conflicting messages (Respondent 3).

However, some tutors were seeking information from management of what they should be doing and how they should be working: I was looking “for some kind of direction from the leadership of the … University [and I was…].... waiting for central instruction”(Respondent 2).

One of the main issues was that tutors realised that students could not get information they needed from the university itself and that the tutors themselves were not authorised to give out certain information leaving the tutors at the centre of the ‘storm’. This was felt to be an additional burden when they themselves had their own personal and family issues: “The students’ calls were not answered (centrally), ...(as) they cannot cope with the number of calls from the students. Online tutors are their sources of help” (Respondent 9).

Many respondents felt they were the only port of call for students in distress at this time: “and I was frustrated because I was being asked questions I could not answer” (Respondent 3). Another commented: “Knowing that some would panic, worry, be distressed. All I could do was sit by my phone and my lap top all evening and all weekend and be there for them” (Respondent 1).

Whilst some students were hugely overburdened due to increased workload (eg health professionals) or due to caring roles (eg home schooling), others had more time than ever before for their studies. Not only this, tutors’ noted that for some the pandemic lockdown conditions created a vacuum and they craved for the opportunity to communicate with tutors and fellow students. This was evidenced by: “However, to my surprise and amazement in the early days of lock down I had great attendance [at online tutorials] as some students were using it as a platform to talk to
someone different, especially those who were on their own or were shielding” (Respondent 5).

Participant 1 summarised the majority of respondents when they chose the image of a sculpture as a reflection of the world feeling ‘off kilter’. Communications were confused and noisy leaving a feeling of disorientation. The participant explained they felt the need to filter and make sense of the myriad of communications in order to provide a clear voice to the student and that this sensemaking also helped her see that ‘business as normal’ would continue.

The sense of responsibility and burden on tutors, rather than university management, was felt by participants. Whilst we had previously seen positivity at an enhanced tutor role, invisible management or distant decisions imposed on tutors were poorly received and resented. Whilst some communications appeared as excessive, noisy and confusing, in contrast tutors were also suspicious of management silence when it appeared as an active decision to do nothing until plans became clearer.

Reflection on the Findings
The three axes chosen help us explore our learning, we consider where we were, where are are, and where we may be going forward as Higher education teachers. As researchers we are now reflecting upon the stage of entering the pandemic (March – June 2020) and the lived experiences of the tutors. By recording this snapshot of a timescape we are evaluating which aspects of academic identity and behaviours are produced in times of extreme work.

The pandemic is now seen as accelerant of change and after some two years, there is no ‘snapping back’ of the timescape to where we began this journey. HE is now in the post digital age where online is a given norm not a bolt on or even an integrated strategy. In the post digital teaching world the lived experiences of tutors will continue to be evaluated in order to better understand online identity and behaviours.

Conclusions: next steps?
It is all too easy as we pick up our post pandemic responsibilities and new hybrid ways of working to minimise and normalise the changes that happened in the intense heat of the lockdown cauldron. These narratives and photographic snapshots capture a liminal state when other presents happened and other futures seemed possible. Whilst we can say that the pandemic provided an accelerant to digital teaching, pedagogies and tutor identity work, it is important to capture the learning and lived experiences that went on at this time. The path dependencies of online control (see Collins et al 2020) and managerialism temporarily receded. In this new state it would have been easy to forget that intense period of liminality which would now have been washed away without a record of feelings, emotions and behaviours. Early conclusions point to that fact that intense and emotive phases of work may produce positive impacts on work identity as well as negative. Learnings taken include the importance of nurturing the positive aspects of identity, such as autonomy and
responsibility, so they are not diluted.

The pandemic has produced a great deal of valuable and varied teaching and learning scholarship which this study sits within. For example, areas of study that are now emerging include pedagogies of the home, influencer-led pedagogies and pedagogies of discomfort (Kukulska-Hulme, 2022). This liminal state of teaching and learning is therefore one amongst many focused on teaching and learning during the pandemic (Rice and Dallacqua, 2022). We plan to develop our thoughts with a focus on further evaluating the meaning of timescapes in teaching and learning and how images can frame experiences.

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