CONNECT OR DISCONNECT: ACADEMIC IDENTITY IN A DIGITAL AGE

Sue Watling, University of Hull, United Kingdom

The 21st century has seen a rapid expansion of digital ways of working. Within higher education, there is an urgent need to ensure students acquire essential digital graduate attributes during their time at university while institutions themselves are moving towards more blended forms of design and delivery. This flexibility is particularly suited for increasingly diverse student cohorts, many of whom are combining part-time and full-time study with work and other commitments. Virtual learning environments which offer 24/7 access to digital resources, at a time, place and device of choice, have the potential to meet the complex demands of 21st century higher education. However, while the field of education technology research includes literature around how students learn as e-learners, there is less knowledge about how academic staff teach as e-teachers. Little is known about how they conceptualise their practice, in particular how they negotiate the processes through which academic identity on the internet is built.

A three-year investigation into the digital experiences of staff who teach and support learning in UK higher education explored what it means to be an academic in a digital society (Watling; 2014, 2015). Research participants were enrolled on a teacher education programme called Teaching and Learning in a Digital Age (TELEDA). The programme was developed and facilitated by the researcher, with data being collected from forums, reflective journals and end of course interviews. Learning activities included an introduction to using social media to build an academic profile. This not only highlighted lower than expected levels of digital literacies and confidence, it also revealed a reluctance to transfer professional identity into what was perceived as personal social spaces. While some academic staff appear digitally fluent, this appears to obscure a majority who have yet to make the necessary digital shifts in attitudes and practice. There is a growing disconnect between the requirements of 21st century higher education and the reality of digital shyness and resistance among staff who teach and support learning. This is resulting in a silencing of their academic voice. As the platforms for educational debate and discussion move online, those who have yet to connect and establish digital identities are being essentially excluded from participation.

To teach and support learning in 2018 means to become involved in a range of altered practices. Educators are required to navigate complex landscapes where traditional approaches and new perspectives collide. The open education movement has challenged historical conceptions around the acquisition, sharing and distribution of knowledge (Daniel, 2012). Digital literacies involve working with multiple media formats, including audio and video while bitcoin, blockchain and badges are all examples of new currencies with the potential to transform

traditional ways of working. Threaded throughout these changes are the pedagogic shifts from didactic transmission models of teaching to more student centred interactive approaches to learning design (Laurillard, 2002).

Of all the challenges currently facing higher education, the need to tackle the digitally divided practices of early and late adopters of technology enhanced learning, requires more attention and focus than it is currently receiving. The shifts from paper-text to digital-based knowledge production and dissemination, via teaching, learning and research, requires complex sets of literacies. These encompass the creation, curation, selecting, sharing and synthesis of knowledge from online as well as face-to-face perspectives. Overall, they can be seen to represent a broader set of social literacies which constitute the core elements of what it means to be an academic in a digital age. However, across the sector, universities continue to apply competency-based ICT training approaches to the development of digital skills. These deficit models of competence risk obscuring the realities of digital adoption and use which in themselves constitute complex and multifaceted landscapes.

Analysis of the data from the TELEDA research suggests a broader understanding of digital literacies as socially situated practices could be beneficial. Such an approach would constitute more meaningful engagement with literacies of the digital kind in order to usefully inform future development. This would be of particular value where institutions are seeking to support academics to make digital shifts from disconnected to connected academic identity and practice.

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