

e-teaching craft and practice

Sue Watling

University of Lincoln, UK

Staff at the University of Lincoln, UK, are repositioned as students on the virtual learning environment (VLE) for the teacher education programme 'Teaching and Learning in a Digital Age' (TELEDA). Modules explore the social relations of virtual learning through a community approach to sharing practice, and using tools like wikis, journals and forums to demonstrate the challenges of digital scholarship enables 'insider' knowledge of the craft of e-teaching to be gained through experiential learning. As sector-wide shifts to flexible design and delivery increase, greater attention to the digital confidence and capabilities of staff who teach and support learning is required. Investigating the uncertain spaces between the rhetoric and the reality of teaching online has shaped the author's doctoral research into digital education. This paper offers emerging research findings which include how experiential approaches like TELEDA are worthy investments of time and resources and reinforce the value of embedding the craft elements of e-teaching into CPD and teacher education programmes.

Keywords: e-teaching, e-learning, teacher education, digital literacies, higher education

Introduction

A lack of convergence between the rhetorical promise and present-day reality of e-learning (Laurillard 2001, Reeves *et al* 2011) has resulted in the lecture and seminar remaining primary modes of transmission while many virtual learning environments (VLE) resemble content repositories rather than sites of active learning (Selwyn 2007, Heirdsfield *et al* 2011). Relationships between technology and social change are seldom addressed with insufficient attention paid to pedagogic theory underpinning lecture reinvention or sustaining educational debate through online communication (Freisen 2009, Saljo 2009, Selwyn 2007, 2014). Those who drive technology adoption are rarely those who use it in daily practice, yet calls for technology enhanced learning and flexible pedagogies continue (Ryan & Tilbury 2013). Successful learning online is dependent on digitally literate staff who can motivate, enthuse and retain students but the published evidence base appears to privilege student engagement and the point of view of technology innovators over the day to day experience of staff who teach and support learning. Greater attention to the relationship between these staff and their VLE is required. The author of this paper, a senior lecturer in educational development, used an action research doctorate to investigate further the craft of e-teaching. This paper describes the background and development of the research and offers some emerging ideas and concepts.

e-learning success or failure

At the turn of the century, VLE were embedded into university systems amid promises of increased efficiency, self-directed learning and new global markets (NCIHE 1997). Functionality took precedence over essential shifts in pedagogies, often leading to replication of existing practice which failed to take into account the differences between on and off campus design and delivery (Lisewski 2004, Bennett & Lockyer 2004, Bell & Bell 2005). Critical perspectives on technology adoption (Clegg *et al* 2003, Conole 2004, Freisen 2008, Saljo 2009) sit beside calls for increased attention to design theory (Beetham & Sharpe 2013, Reeves *et al* 2011, Bennett & Oliver 2011, Gunn & Steele 2012). Over-reliance on case study approaches for evaluating learning technologies mean '...it is extremely difficult to trace the impact of educational research to anything that really matters.' (Reeves *et al*, 2012:57) and 'the promise of virtual learning in the 1990s has come to nothing and elearning within the university has failed'. (Feenburg 2011:2). With new digital phases like OER, MOOC, social media and mobile learning, early promises of transformation have been revived (Anderson 2007, JISC 2009, Conole 2010) but media enthusiasm contrasts with reports of low appetite for change (Watling 2009, Heirdsfield *et al* 2011, Sheward & Hamilton 2012) alongside deficits of time, support and appropriate resources (Walker *et al* 2012). Consequently the perceived challenges of e-learning today (Johnson *et al* 2014) are not dissimilar from barriers identified a decade earlier (Bennett & Lockyer 2004).

e-teaching challenges and rewards

Divides exist between those who actively promote technology and those who use it for teaching. A mechanism for shifting from digital shyness to digital confidence is required. In 2012, a Higher Education Academy (HEA)

Change Academy programme enabled colleagues from across the author's institution to explore the philosophy and practice of open educational resources through a 12 month project, Embedding OER Practice. Low levels of digital literacies were highlighted while the value of dedicated staff time for enhancing digital practice was reinforced. An output was Teaching and Learning in a Digital Age (TELEDA), an online course designed to legitimate future development time for teaching in digital places. Staff were relocated as students on the institutional VLE and engaged in an activity-based curriculum which included critical reflective journaling and assessment by e-portfolio. The course, 30 M level credits, was added to the university's teacher education programmes in 2012, piloted 2012/13 with 12 internal staff whose remit was teaching and supporting learning, and repeated in 2013/14 with an enrolment of 22. Delivered and assessed through the VLE, TELEDA included the principles of online design, communication and assessment alongside an introduction to open education. Forums and wikis were utilised for collaborative working and participants kept online journals as evidence of critical reflection. Enrolling staff as students offered an authentic student view of e-learning alongside opportunities to consider e-teaching to individual practice. Following recommendation from external examiner and colleagues, a second TELEDA introducing social media and e-resources was approved in 2014. The course is currently recruiting and begins in October. Both courses will be validated as a PG Cert in Digital Education in 2015. The TELEDA development cycles, from initiation in Embedding OER Practice to the final PG Cert validation, constitute the action research method of the author's doctoral studies.

The shift from face-to-face to face-less delivery is challenging. Action research provides space for examining the complex practice changes essential for the craft of e-teaching (Kolb 1984, McNiff 2013). It is unlikely a single programme of digital change can reach everyone, in particular the digitally shy, but the Change Academy programme showed the effectiveness of bottom-up approaches via local 'champions'. TELEDA has had this effect; "...consequently I volunteered to become Digital Champion for Humanities and will undertake additional Blackboard training to support the role." (Watling 2014). There is always a risk participation in TELEDA will reinforce existing prejudice, for example "I see why students don't really like it [Blackboard] as compared to other sites...it is very clunky and dry" and "I'm also finding the navigation in Blackboard unfriendly...[I am] more used to being able to get around quickly and easily" (Watling 2014). However, TELEDA has provided opportunities to explore resistance and turn it around. One colleague reported surprise at feeling defensive when Blackboard was critiqued, saying they now realised "Blackboard is not the problem, there is nothing wrong with Blackboard, being an online tutor is just very different...." (Watling 2014). TELEDA provides time and place to reflect meaningfully on how VLE can generate active learning opportunities through emphasis on shared practice and inquiry where participants are engaged "in purposeful critical discourse and reflection to construct personal meaning and confirm mutual understanding" (Garrison 2011: 6).

TELEDA offers 'insider' knowledge of how students view their VLE. As well as highlighting the flexibility of 'any-time any-place' access, participants new to learning online discover off campus provision is affected by poor broadband or wi-fi connections. They experience the 'uncertainty' inherent in virtual identity construction and the limitation of text communication with its potential for misunderstanding. While isolation can be countered by use of social media tools, the course emphasised not everyone feels comfortable with these.

I haven't yet recovered from the tiny but upsetting Facebook Incident in which I briefly defied the Group Leader....I'm sure I am at least as grey and anonymous to them as most of them are to me and they probably don't even remember my brave stance against the hegemony of Facebook. (Watling 2014)

New viewpoints are emerging from the experiential nature of TELEDA. "I think adopting the role of student is a useful experience as it reminds me of the pressures involved in studentship and enables greater empathy to students and their experiences" and "...I felt very frustrated ...I can now empathise with students who complain of technological problems" (Watling 2014). Collaborative group work demonstrated the value of previously unused VLE tools while many found their reflective journal an effective learning tool. "I like keeping a reflective journal. If my small module runs after Christmas I am considering doing something like this or maybe opening a discussion board as another opportunity to get some direct student input." (Watling 2014) TELEDA creates realistic opportunities for consideration of the essential practice shifts required for e-teaching.

It has changed the way I will approach what I will do online in the future...you're learning about different ways of presenting things and what might work for you doesn't work for someone else and what might work for someone else might not work for you and that's all part of the experience – so it's been incredibly valuable – I'm really pleased I've done it. (Watling 2014)

e-teaching rhetoric and reality

Digital literacies, those “...capabilities which fit someone for living, learning and working in a digital society” (JISC 2014), are personal. They reflect individual ways of working and as such, there is an absence of any one-size-fits-all model for ensuring their acquisition and development. With only a screen to mediate the relationship between staff and students, e-teaching will always involve pedagogies of uncertainty. Digital literacies for e-teachers include challenging myths of digital competence which arise from assumptions of a narrow range of access criteria, for example not everyone can hear content or clearly see the screen. The flexibility of digital data to be customised to suit individual requirements remains its primary strength but utilizing this requires raised awareness of diversity and the complexity of digital divides and exclusions. While ongoing evaluation and reflection-on-practice are essential techniques for all teaching practitioners, e-teachers need to not only manage uncertainty and the unknown but demonstrate digital confidence. This can involve locating, creating and storing digital text, images and multimedia alongside applying traditional pedagogic principles such as curriculum alignment to online environments. There are increasing expectations academics will maintain digital profiles through professional networking platforms, use social bookmarking tools, navigate repositories of OER, describe a MOOC and be present on Twitter. A craft constitutes skilled behaviour and e-teaching demands behavioural shifts in practice alongside a careful construction of the presentation of self online. The craft of e-teaching represents a new layer of learning for teaching professionals and greater attention to a digital literacies lens for teacher education.

Lack of consensus on what to call e-teachers is symptomatic of the wider absence of their status. Lecturers are rarely referred to as e-lecturers. Instead e-teachers appear in the literature in a variety of guises including assessor, designer, facilitator, instructor, moderator, tutor, trainer and other (Goodyear et al 2001). Although the term e-learner has been widely accepted, the designation of e-teacher has not. The argument is not a pedantic one. The practice of e-teaching demands a different approach to face-to-face lectures and seminars. The e-teacher has to facilitate learning experiences with no body language or other clues to help adjust pace and timing. It involves the management of uncertainty, something which is best discovered through teacher education and professional development programmes rather than the first experience of teaching in an online environment. Retention online is poor (Simpson 2003) and an experiential teacher education programme like TELEDA, based on interactivity, shared practice and inquiry can surface the demands and loneliness of long distance education. VLE themselves contain genuine promise of widening participation and enhancing personal and professional development but to achieve this requires time, reward and recognition for pursuing and completing an apprenticeship to the e-teaching craft.

Conclusion

Promises of educational transformation through e-learning have been based on rhetoric rather than reality, yet calls continue across the sector for more flexible design and delivery of higher education. This paper suggests attention to the craft of e-teaching is missing from existing teacher education research and practice. The emphasis on the ‘e’ in e-teaching should not be seen as a pedantic endeavor but an essential step for developing digitally confident academics who can competently manage the ‘virtual’ alongside the ‘real’ in their professional careers. The divide between the rhetoric and practice of virtual learning is being recognised but there is still need for whole-institution solutions to bridging the uncertain spaces between on-campus and off-campus education. This paper calls for greater recognition of the value of the experiential in the planning of teacher education and staff development opportunities. Programmes like TELEDA, which are based on an ‘insider’ approach, offer genuine experiences of the ‘pedagogies of uncertainty’ inherent in virtual learning landscapes. The craft of e-teaching has been shown to be an integral layer of professional teaching practice, one which is well worth the investment of time and resources, and is critically relevant for successful adoption of flexible online education opportunities.

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Contact author: Sue Watling, swatling@lincoln.ac.uk

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