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AUTOMATION IN DISTANCE LEARNING: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY OF UNLEARNING AND ACADEMIC IDENTITY CHANGE LINKED TO AUTOMATION OF STUDENT MESSAGING WITHIN DISTANCE LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the unlearning and learning undertaken by adjuncts (Associate Lecturers) during the introduction of automated messaging by the university as part replacement of adjunct pastoral support for students. Automated messages were introduced by the University to standardize the student experience in terms of qualification communications, for example, reminders of forthcoming assessment deadlines. This change in communicative strategy is due to shifting power from a collegial to a managerial culture and practice in supporting distance learning students effectively. This is a university-wide initiative in a bid to improve progression and completion in an increasingly cost-focused higher education environment. The introduction of automated messaging requires adjuncts to learn new processes, and thus unlearn previous organizational routines which impacts upon their academic identity and perceived power within their roles.

1. INTRODUCTION

Within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and particularly within distance learning providers, there is an increased emphasis on the use of technology to improve retention, progression and completion cost effectively. Cost drivers, coupled with a drive to improve the student experience and qualification completion rates, prompted the Open University to introduce an Information Technology system to target e-mail communications to predefined student groups. The attractiveness of these systems is indicated by reports on technologically-driven retention activities, which have multiplied; from Government perspectives e.g. Browne et al. (2008), and from individual HEIs, for example, Long and Siemens (2011), Ferguson (2012), Slade and Prinsloo (2013). Much emergent literature appears aligned to institutional perspectives and student experience rather than narratives grounded in the lived experiences of lecturers. Changes to practice are being imposed, impacting established teaching-related routines (Akgün et al. 2007), learning and unlearning, identity and relationships between adjunct faculty, administrators and management.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Learning and unlearning

Research on learning and unlearning (Hislop et al. 2014, Tsang and Zahra 2008) stems from initial work by Garfinkel (1967), Hedberg's (1981) subsequent article "How organizations learn and unlearn" and Giddens' structuration theory (1984). These contributions and others form two intertwining bodies of work regarding learning and unlearning; organizational, and individual, as tabulated by Hislop et al. (2014: 543).

Tsang and Zahra (2008) point out that although Hedberg (1981) stresses unlearning as well as learning, the overwhelming content of his discussion, as supported by other authors (e.g. Wang and Ahmed (2003)) focuses on learning to the detriment of a more full exploration of unlearning as a process.

Literature indicates that organizational unlearning impacts processes as part of change, although for a mature organization routines are indicated as entrenched. Tsang and Zahra (2008: 1442) state that: "managers cannot always make clear causal links between unlearning and the acquisition of new skills or improvements in organizational performance". They continue with individuals' unlearning being restricted to fading and wiping, and little evidence that deep unlearning occurs despite Hedberg (1981:3) arguing that "…this discarding activity – unlearning – is as important a part of understanding as is adding new knowledge".

In their typology, Tsang and Zahra (2008) set out three distinct types of change which they characterized as; episodic change which was infrequent and discontinuous, ostensive change via a set of written procedures and practices, and performative change to actual routines of implementation. Hislop et al. (2014: 547), and Turc and Baumard (2007), underpin through early works of Nystrom and Starbuck (1984) and Hedberg (1981); all observe close links between organizational change including unlearning phases, which are essential for facilitating adaptive behavior. Hedberg (1981:18) expresses this directly by saying that "organizations learn and unlearn via their members". The impact of individual level unlearning on organizations can, however, be perceived as "difficult, challenging and time consuming", Hislop et al. (2014: 548).

2.2 Academic identity

A key concept for evolving academic identity is the link to developing managerialism in Higher Education. Berg et al. (2013:383) write "…private sector practices of accountability, audit, control and surveillance have proliferated in the public sector". 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 new procedures (e.g. automated messaging) eroding collegiate culture. An earlier study of new managerial approaches in Higher Education by Goolnik (2012:19), explored feelings of mistrust and of a professionally and personally unfulfilled self. Recent developments in the study of identity work include paying attention to alternative selves (Obodaru, 2012), threatened selves (Petriglieri, 2011) and narrative selves (Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010). As Clarke and Knight (2015:15) assert "instead of presenting 'resistant' selves, academics are inclined to comply with or conform to the demands of the performance culture…"

Increasingly, academics are under pressure to alter their ways of thinking and behaving in an evolving managerial culture, and to concern themselves with the organizational aspects of how tutoring is delivered (Hinings, 2005).

2.3 The research gap addressed

As distinct from much of the research around organizational unlearning and identity, our research was undertaken within an HE institution. The majority of extant research proposed theoretical typologies, in contrast this study is empirically based. There is therefore, an identified gap in investigating how managerially imposed change shifts power, affects the process of individual learning and unlearning (e.g. Hislop et al. 2014), and impacts academic identity in a mature HE context.

2.4 Approach taken / methods of analysis

The aims of this research are to add to emerging literature by examining the process of unlearning using a sample of teaching faculty within Business and Law. Impressions were collated over a 12 month period whilst the HEI introduced automated student support systems. The objective was to evaluate, using qualitative methodologies, adjuncts' perceptions of potential impact on and changes to both their role and identity, and the learning and unlearning around automated interventions and its associated impact on student retention.

Themed focus groups were selected as an appropriate method of eliciting views on tutors' work in supporting students and possible impact of new learning interventions on the tutor role as well as on student experience. A group of six Business and Law tutors representing introductory undergraduate modules were engaged with the project. The participants were experienced, and held substantive contracts with the HEI. Opinions were explored through a series of telephone and online interviews and face-to-face focus groups. Discussions evolved depending upon interviewees' experiences, producing data around topics including student focus, changes to tutor role, managerial communication, student services, and evaluation. Verbatim transcripts were subsequently coded and evaluated independently by four researchers, to identify dominant themes with the results then synthesized into a group response. Analysis was grounded in the words and reported experiences of participants. Miles and Huberman's (1994) framework was adopted to support theme triangulation, qualitatively evaluating perceptions of potential impact on and changes to their role around automated student interventions, both in the lead up to, and following, the introduction of these interventions.

2.5 Main findings

Discussions centered around various ways that adjuncts could learn new processes/procedures in the future, meaning that they had to undertake 'wiping', also known as 'directed unlearning' or 'behavioral unlearning', Rushmer and Davies (2004). These methods included working with automated interventions, mentoring other adjuncts, peer monitoring, working with Blackboard Collaborate recordings, adjunct staff development events, and networking. In the past, participants reported sending out their own emails if a student failed to submit an assignment on time; however, with the confidence that the organization would send a reminder intervention message, adjuncts chose to call or text as alternative use of their time. As one respondent commented: "…*it's quite a job of work for me to go through each of these interventions [for] modules and carefully think about what I actually want to say to supplement those messages and not duplicate them, because I read a few of them and I thought oh well that means I don't have to send this in now*". As this research was undertaken early on in the change process, there was little evidence at this point to suggest fading or deep unlearning. Our findings suggested that episodic change was limited to support for student queries rather than teaching and assessment practice which appears unchanged for adjuncts at this time. Adjuncts were given strategic and operational documents as part of the investigation and invited to share their opinions for the first time via the research process, which can be seen as an example of ostensive change in itself; this was very well received, for example the opportunity to input in "any meaningful way" rather than just report back.

Adjuncts indicated their academic identity might start to fracture as a result of imposed automation and the perceived loss of pedagogic support routines and pastoral care, as discussed by Goolnik (2012). One respondent feared lessening ties and a severed relationship with a student, stating: *"I'm going to have to change my practices so that L1* [introductory level] *don't become overwhelmed (by email). I am just a bit worried about where students will feel guidance should come from"*. Adjuncts also became aware of their changing academic role as more management structures were put in place, thus supporting the work of Berg et al. (2013) and their focus on the impact of managerialism on academic identity: *"I think it is important, this balance between SST* [Student Support Team] *and AL* [Associate Lecturer] *intervention, and as an AL we do need to become clear on what our role is and what the role is of the new evolving SST… I think it's not 100% clear at the moment where levels of responsibility lie"*. And, another respondent's insight: *"…people will worry their pastoral side… is being slowly taken away from them"*.

Due to the diversity of the adjuncts' backgrounds, their views on the impact of increased managerialism on their professional/commercial/traditional academic selves varied. One respondent commented: *"You will have ALs who are practitioners who will not have any experience of an HE environment whatsoever. Yes it's easy to assume it runs like a large business"*. Notably, it was acknowledged that taking part in the research itself could be seen as a means of greater engagement with the change processes and routines, thus reinforcing organizational and individual (un)learning and identity.

We have drawn upon the work of Petriglieri (2011) by paying close empirical attention to *how* the tensions of a productive, adjunct identity are reproduced in the adjunct role. In contrast to Petriglieri (2011), however, our findings and analysis suggest that in interaction our identities are always, at least potentially,

under threat from competing and alternative possible identities; however, these are managed discursively so that a coherent (in the moment) identity is (re)produced.

3. CONCLUSION

This paper has sought to provide empirical evidence of effects of organizational change from a collegiate to managerial culture in a HE context more specifically adjunct academic identity, unlearning and learning as transformed in response to the introduction of automated student messaging. The processes of learning and unlearning new practices have been found to impact adjuncts' perception of their academic identity and behavior, although we have been unable to establish the extent to which this occurs over a longer time frame.

Our work concurs with Clarke and Knights (2015) who state that "Identity management often manifests itself in contemporary academia.[...], as a response to the performative demands of managerialism". Although they characterize this as "instrumental game-playing", in our work we viewed this as evidence of the adjuncts' need to negotiate academic identity initiated by the learning and unlearning work. The difference may be explained by comparative insecurity in part-time adjunct as opposed to tenured faculty roles.

A further longitudinal study is planned to observe evolving adjunct academic identities in response to continual changes instigated by the shift from collegial to managerial culture within HE institutions. Further research could include comparative studies between distance learning and traditional face-to-face pedagogy, or comparative studies taking a cross-cultural perspective.

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