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Displaced but not replaced: the impact of e-learning on academic identities in higher education

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Challenges facing universities are leading many to implement institutional strategies to incorporate e-learning rather than leaving its adoption up to enthusiastic individuals. Although there is growing understanding about the impact of e-learning on the student experience, there is less understanding of academics' perceptions of e-learning and its impact on their identities. This paper explores the changing nature of academic identities revealed through case study research into the implementation of e-learning at one UK university. By providing insight into the lived experiences of academics in a university in which technology is not only transforming access to knowledge but also influencing the balance of power between academic and student in knowledge production and use, it is suggested that academics may experience a jolt to their 'trajectory of self' when engaging with e-learning. The potential for e-learning to prompt loss of teacher presence and displacement as knowledge expert may appear to undermine the ontological security of their academic identity.

Keywords: e-learning; academic identities; universities

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Introduction

Increasing prominence is being given to the potential for e-learning to transform the shape of higher education, yet it is also cited as a potential cause of the demise of universities (Cornford and Pollock 2003). The role of information and communication technologies (ICT) in re-shaping access to information in the ‘knowledge society’ and their ubiquity in everyday lives now ensures that learners expect to engage with e-learning both on and off campus (Dutton and Loader 2002). Pressures on UK universities to address the demands of the global market and to accommodate students’ expectations about access to ICT for learning is leading many to implement e-learning strategies, encouraged by government and funding bodies (DfES 2005; HEFCE 2005). However, although a growing number of universities in the UK are introducing institution-wide technologies such as virtual learning environments (VLE) (Browne et al. 2008), they are still struggling to engage academic staff with e-learning to any significant extent (Becker and Jokivirta 2007; Salmon 2005). Research into the impact of e-learning is growing and whereas much of this focuses on the student experience or broader implementation strategies, there is less detailed understanding of academics’ perceptions of e-learning and its impact on their roles and identities. This paper explores the changing nature of academic identities revealed through research into the implementation of e-learning at one UK university and provides insight into the lived experiences of academics in a higher education environment in which technology is not only transforming access to knowledge but may also be influencing the balance of power between academic and student in knowledge production and use.

Academic identity formation and change

Formation of Self- identity

Self-identity grows out of an individual’s achievements built up over a period of time, expressed as the “trajectory of the self” that the individual gives voice to through a coherent narrative about themselves. This biographical narrative is constructed over time through a process of reflexive activity that continuously revises the narrative in response to changing situations and events (Giddens 1991). Underpinning this reflexive activity are two aspect of successful identity work, the concept of ontological security, that provides a sense of continuity and order in events, and the protective ‘cocoon’ that acts as a barrier to perceived threats and “which stands guard over the self in its dealings with everyday reality” (Giddens 1991, 3). On occasions when external reality breaks through and the cocoon is breached, the narrative cannot be sustained and individuals experience anxiety and a sense of being overwhelmed by external events.

Academic identity

Academic identities are defined by three key aspects, the discipline, the institution, and a sense of the profession (Henkel 2000). The importance of the discipline as a cultural socialiser for academics is well researched (Becher and Trowler 2001; Henkel 2000). It is suggested that academics have far greater allegiance to their discipline, a community that extends beyond organisational and national boundaries, than to their

employing university. However, changes in the nature of academic identity have been noted. The traditional collegiality of academic culture is perceived to be in decline, as academics suggest that a sense of isolation, both from colleagues and the institution, is the more predominant feeling (Nixon 1996). The growing emphasis on performativity and accountability places more pressure on individuals to construct academic identities in line with corporate rather than disciplinary identities (Harris 2005). This, together with more stressful working conditions (Kinman, G., Jones and Kinman, R. 2006), has given rise to the belief that academic identity, with its long association with the concepts of collegiality and autonomy, is in crisis. Some suggest that the persistent erosion of academic autonomy and freedom is actually de-professionalising academic staff, leading to the proletarianisation of the academy (Fulton and Holland 2001).

Challenges such as the ‘massification’ of higher education, rising class sizes, the growth of the quality agenda and pressure to maintain a research profile are having an impact on academics’ perceptions of their teaching role. Yet despite these pressures, Henkel (2000) ascertained that academics still believe the educational role to be important to their professional identity and consider the rewards of being in higher education to be strongly associated with observing students’ progress and their maturation in the discipline. She noted tensions in responding to increased class sizes and the accountability required to meet quality demands which resulted in academics being “required to embrace new approaches to higher education, which ran counter to the myths and models that they valued” (Henkel 2000, 217). As one of these new approaches, e-learning in this context may create yet more tension if it does indeed challenge myths and models.

Alternatively, more optimistic views propose that academics still have considerably control over their work (Delanty 2008) and that academic identities are expanding and proliferating, especially the identities of women academics, academics from black and minority ethnic groups (Clegg 2008) and younger academics (Archer 2008). These views are drawn from work that emphasises the importance of the local context in developing an understanding of the position of academic identities rather than relying on global analysis (Clegg 2008) and recognises that even within the same organisation the lived realities in one university department may be completely different to those in another (Knight and Trowler 2001). These studies of academic identities in the local context, together with a lessening of the primacy of the disciplinary focus as a determining factor, are giving rise to a greater understanding of the complexity and diversity of identities and a more positive outlook on their survival. This study contributes to that understanding as it considers the influence of e-learning on academic identities in a university that emphasises education for the professions and the employability of its graduates among its core priorities.

Growth of e-learning

The centrality of ICT in the working environment of universities is not in doubt, affecting many aspects of the core areas of teaching, research and administration and there is both excitement and scepticism about the potential for e-learning to transform approaches to teaching and learning. One barrier to fully understanding the outcomes of research in this area is the confusion over terms and definitions associated with e-

learning. Terms such as online, blended, virtual, web-based and technology-enhanced may be added to learning, all resulting in slightly different nuanced understandings of the extent to which technology is involved in the practices of learning or teaching. Even the definitions of e-learning as “learning facilitated and supported through the use of information and communication technologies” (JISC 2004, 10) or “the use of technologies in learning opportunities” (HEFCE 2005, 5) leave the field for exploration wide open.

Studies into the use of e-learning in universities are often associated with accounts that are influenced by the growth in managerialist practices and demands for greater accountability. In these studies e-learning is seen as a means of providing more efficient, flexible and accessible ways to deliver education in response to resource constraints and changing student needs and also to stay competitive in a rapidly changing global environment, as Blass and Davis suggest:

E-learning does offer a unique selling point (USP) consistent with expressed national priorities of widening participation and increasing commercialisation of the education sector. That USP is accessibility. (Blass and Davis 2003, 229)

‘Customer demand’ is another driver for expanding the use of e-learning, as universities strive to meet the expectations of the digital generation of learners (Franklin and Van Harmelen 2007). Surveys identify that the current generation of ‘conventional’ undergraduates’ familiarity with mobile phones, instant text messaging and other social networking technologies is shaping their expectations of the use of technology for teaching and learning (Conole and Oliver 2007; Salaway and Borreson Caruso 2008).

However, with the value of e-learning in supporting campus-based learning still contested, some claim that this universal acceptance of e-learning as the inevitable way forward for universities is a form of technological determinism that should not be accepted without question (Clegg, Hudson and Steel 2003; Cornford and Pollock 2003). The far-reaching consequences of the reconfiguration of access to information, people and services afforded through e-learning are not always appreciated and can have a de-stabilising as well as a supportive influence on universities and the identities of those who work in them (Cornford and Pollock 2003; Dutton, Hope Cheong and Park 2004).

Therefore it is acknowledged that in the light of multiple reasons for introducing e-learning such as efficiency, customer satisfaction and market demand, as well as actually enhancing learning, the impact of e-learning on academic identity cannot be wholly isolated from other social practices taking place in universities, but it will be highlighted as an important contributing factor to the de-stabilisation of academic identity.

Impact of e-learning on academics

It is suggested that the effective utilisation of e-learning by academics requires a considerable shift both in skills and conceptions of learning and teaching. In addition

to becoming skilled in the use of technologies, e-learning requires a move from a teaching-centred paradigm that emphasises the transmission of expert knowledge by the academic to a learning-centred paradigm in which students become the discoverers and constructors of knowledge (Hartman, Dziuban and Brophy-Ellison 2007). This new paradigm combines student-centred approaches to teaching with recognition of the validity of knowledge drawn from, or constructed from, sources other than traditional disciplinary discourses (Cullen et al. 2002). It has been suggested that these features associated with e-learning could “fundamentally change the role of the academic” (Blass and Davis 2003: 228).

Academics have traditionally experienced considerable independence in their choice of teaching methods but as the scale and complexity of introducing e-learning within universities requires a strategic and institute-wide approach to its implementation, they may begin to experience greater direction over their teaching. Although membership of their discipline constitutes an important influence on academic identities, so also does the interaction with students that currently takes place predominately within the classroom (Knight and Trowler 2001), so anything that threatens the intimacy of that interaction also threatens identity. E-learning has the potential to challenge academics’ perceptions of learning and teaching, their role identity and self-efficacy since “Pedagogy is more than simply putting lecture notes online” (Blass and Davis 2003, 228)

Research into the impact of e-learning on academic identities has been limited. Although some studies do give priority to understanding and accommodating individual responses to change, the messiness on the ground and the lived reality of change as experienced by academics is less often exposed. In contrast with the growing body of research into the student experience of e-learning that emphasises the student voice (Creanor et al. 2006), the voice of the academic is not often evident. The academic voice is more often represented through the narratives of enthusiastic innovators and early adopters of e-learning who report the positive impact of e-learning on the student experience, often focusing on the introduction of an innovation in a unit, for example, online discussions (Ellis et al. 2007) or synchronous chat (Rutter 2006). Other studies which are more directly focused on the academics themselves often consider the views of innovators and early adopters (Eynon 2006; McShane 2006) or those who are already intensive users of e-learning (Dutton, Hope Cheong and Park 2004), rather than the late adopters.

Reports on the impact of e-learning from a managerialist perspective (Jones and O’Shea 2004; Richards, O’Shea and Connolly 2004) also contribute to the suppression of the academic voice. Accounts of the strategic introduction of enterprise level e-learning are frequently reported after the implementation and tend to be written from the standpoint of the successful implementers who adopt an implicit technological determinism (Cornford and Pollock 2003) or use approaches to the investigation that hide the full extent of the dynamics associated with the political, economic and social effects of e-learning on the ecology of an organisation and the full range of actors involved in the games played out when it is introduced (Dutton, Hope Cheong and Park 2004).

There is a tendency in many of these studies written in the managerial discourse to blame the individual academic and attribute delays or failure in implementation to an

oversimplification of negative attributes, ill-will, indolence, ineptitude or indiscipline on the part of those at whom the change is aimed (Trowler and Knight 2002), or to portray resistance to change as ‘irrational’ (Arnaboldi and Azzone 2005).

Taylor suggests that it is more likely that academics do not have access to an appropriate pedagogic language to articulate their teaching practice to others outside the tribal boundary of their discipline, which leads to the perception that they are being obstructive of change whereas they are actually raising valid points about its impact on their teaching (Taylor 1999).

A few studies give a glimpse into the lived realities of academics who are coping with e-learning where its use has been mandated. In one example, where the introduction of e-learning has occurred through a management-driven initiative where e-learning packages are developed by learning technologists, academics report being:

...relegated to the role of knowledge workers whose primary task is to connect students with information. (McMurray 2001, 77)

This approach to introducing e-learning threatens academic identity by removing from academics the intellectual capital created by them, packaging their expertise so that it can be delivered to students without their mediation, or replacing them with cheaper teaching assistants.

Another university’s determination to move all of its units online in order to gain market advantage resulted in academics feeling de-skilled by the introduction of e-learning and “re-positioned” by the technology (Wells 2005, 17). Wells reports that academics were “offended” by the rigid structure of the imposed e-learning platform that was “driven by regulation rather than good pedagogy”. One respondent reported that she was in danger of losing her “teacher presence” and that the VLE threatened her confidence. This rare glimpse into the direct impact of e-learning on academics suggests that their cocoon has been breached, their trajectory is being disrupted and ontological security is under threat. Taylor’s findings revealed that academics need to belong to a community to develop an understanding of why e-learning is being introduced, a safe refuge in which to explore new practice and an opportunity to develop practice based on principles that are pedagogically defensible (Taylor 1997). These variations between the managerial perspective on the impact of e-learning and the lived realities of those academics affected by it deserve further exploration.

Context for the study and process of investigation

This study formed part of larger qualitative investigation into the strategic implementation of e-learning in a university in southern England. The overall strategy was to use the case study method that offered the researcher the opportunity to “preserve the multiple realities, the different and even contradictory views of what is happening” (Stake 1995, 12). The larger inquiry, using the diffusion of innovation framework (Rogers 2003) as a sensitising device, explored strategy implementation and change management in a university. The exploration of identities emerged as a feature of the actors caught up in these change processes. The outcomes of a sub-

section of the research involving academics who were beginning to adopt e-learning are reported here.

Data were collected using a focus group interview with nine academics and themes emerging from this analysis were followed up through in-depth individual interviews with a further five academics. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and returned to the respondents for checking. Respondents, who were given pseudonyms, came from a range of disciplines and professional backgrounds, mostly related to business studies or environmental sciences. Analysis of the data was undertaken using Mason's (2002) three levels of 'readings', literal, interpretive and reflexive. The outcomes reported in this study are derived from the interpretive level of analysis.

During the interviews the researcher avoided providing a definition of e-learning so as not to limit participants' responses, either by suggesting 'right answers' or by implying a lack of innovation. Given that many were at the very early stages of adoption, e-learning meant whatever they understood it to mean. Their experiences included engaging students in computer mediated communication (CMC), adding lecturer notes to a VLE, accessing information sources on the Internet and moving from hand-prepared OHP slides to using presentation software such as PowerPoint.

Identity as successful teachers

Respondents' stories about their own preferred teaching practices revealed them as successful face-to-face teachers, proud of their achievements and caring about their students' progress. Their coping strategies for using traditional face-to-face methods had been built up over a period of time and supported their feeling of being in control.

Duncan preferred the opportunity provided by lectures to demonstrate his subject expertise to students. This made him feel secure because he prepared his lectures thoroughly in advance so there was less of a risk of anything beyond his control happening:

I always make a point in the lectures of not using any notes, just OHPs and I think the students think I must be omniscient because they often say 'how do you remember all that stuff?' but I don't think they realise all the work that goes into it beforehand. But you know, when you are dealing with 240 people it has got to be absolutely spot on, hasn't it? Otherwise it can degenerate into chaos... (Duncan, lines 243-247)

Hannah also found that lectures enabled her to exercise control:

I quite like having a big audience of 150 or 200 people. I guess in some ways it's easier because it's very formal. (Hannah, lines 135-137)

Mary preferred a more nurturing approach of working with small groups to help students develop concepts and then targeting her help on those who needed it most:

I prefer the approach where you can say to them [student seminar group] 'Right, get on with the next question and I'll wander round and see what you've done

wrong on this one and just set you right on that', so people are getting individual attention. (Mary, lines 81-86)

When prompted about their use of e-learning, these academics regarded its primary use to be in support of, or supplementary to, their face-to-face teaching. However, their expressed anxieties appeared to acknowledge its threat to their academic identity.

E-learning displacing the academic as knowledge expert

A core feature of their academic identity appeared to be realised around organising and presenting knowledge to students, a role that e-learning appeared to support. When invited to discuss their experiences of using e-learning, they described how they recorded lectures for video streaming on demand and created resource banks of their own research outputs to distribute to their students on CD ROM.

However, these resources were not intended to replace the academic presence; they were designed to augment their physical presence when they were not in contact with students in the classroom. The campus experience, they believed, was the primary reason students came to this university and although technology had a role to play in that experience, face-to-face contact between the academic and the student was more important. However, even their authority to regulate this face-to-face contact was being challenged by the rising demand from students to 'get their money's worth' from their tutors, as Angela noted:

... as students become more and more conscious of the fact that they are paying for their courses, they want to buy peoples' time for that money, they want that pound of flesh. (Lines 317-319: Angela)

Nevertheless, the academic was still in control, still the expert provider of knowledge, even when they were not in the classroom. E-learning played a complementary role and in this way the protective cocoon was retained.

However, when their students' expertise with technology was clearly observed to be more advanced than their own, and this began to have an impact on their academic role as expert knowledge provider, breaches in their protective cocoon could be observed.

Alice described how a group of her students had created a website and were using it to share resources to support a group project they were engaged in. Her teacher self identity prompted her to express support for this action initially, because it was evidence of her students acting as independent learners and collaborating in group learning, all laudable features of self-managed learning that she would consider her role as a lecturer to encourage:

... the students themselves, the first years, decided to set up their own website, which I think is excellent, and put their own resources and assignments on it, and that sort of thing. (Lines 221-223: Alice)

She continues with her narrative of support but then admits to a lack of expertise with the technology which her students have demonstrated:

...I am quite happy to support all that but I don't feel an expert, you know. I do direct them to web pages and that sort of thing, but there is so much out there, I don't feel I am an expert in picking out the specific interactive stuff, which I think is really the way its going. (Lines 224-227: Alice)

However, eventually she not only appeared to recognise that her lack of expertise with the technology was threatening her sense of self-worth, but also that her students were relying less on her for access to knowledge. Her role as an intermediary in identifying and passing on appropriate knowledge was being undermined by her own lack of knowledge of the growing range of electronic resources available on the web. Eventually her reasoned narrative gave way to frustration and concern about students' overuse of the web as a source of knowledge and their inability to discriminate between the validity of information they found and the academic sources in the library:

... there are these other sources, there is the library and these are really a lot more thoroughly referenced compared to what's on the web, and we talked earlier about what's reliable and what isn't, you know someone's home page on greenhouse global warming or whatever it is, er, its almost to say, hey hang on, there is that fabulous stuff out there, but ... (Lines 239-243: Alice)

Although these academics appeared to have little understanding of the ways in which students used technology to communicate with each other, they were beginning to realise that this expertise did threaten to change the balance of power between themselves and their students and were already recognising the potential of this to lead to a de-professionalising of their work. If the academic's role as a gatekeeper to resources for learning is undermined by the growth of electronic sources and the status of their academic knowledge is downgraded (Becher and Trowler 2001), new gatekeeper roles may arise (Dutton, Hope Cheong and Park 2004). Academics like Alice, from a scientific discipline and an epistemology emphasising reliability and validity of scientific data published in high impact-rated journals, are likely to be even more challenged than their colleagues in other disciplines by the growth of opportunities to publish that are now afforded by Web 2.0 technologies.

E-learning leading to disembodied identity and loss of teacher presence

Previous research suggests that academic identity is developed in the classroom through interaction with students (Knight and Trowler 2001; Taylor 1999). So when these academics described taking even the first steps towards making greater use of technology in the classroom, for example, using presentation software, they expressed

feeling a loss of control over their teacher presence. Mary explained how she had felt out of control from the moment she started to use PowerPoint in her lectures. She felt she had lost control of her ability to have an appropriate discourse with her students and over her physical environment. She was not able to demonstrate the mental methods of calculation using her usual approach of writing each step up on her acetate on the overhead projector in front of the students, her academic presence was reduced to a mechanical process of pressing a key on the PC to change the slides:

...all I was doing was talking to them [her students] and pressing the button and saying now this bit, this bit and this bit. I much prefer to be there with my exercise, my piece of paper and my acetate to write on... (Mary, lines 158-165)

She ended by saying she preferred to 'be there', suggesting that by using the technology, although still physically present, she had actually given away her academic presence in the lecture theatre to the technology. She also found that her physical movement was constrained by having to stay close to the PC to operate it, as it was placed on one side of the lecture theatre, rather than being able to move around the projector which would have been placed at the front and in the centre of the lecture theatre.

Hannah was aware of her colleagues using CMC but she could not conceive of a situation where she was not present at all times to correct students' mistakes:

...how would you possibly monitor 150 people? You'd have to set up different forums to have seminar discussions, which in itself could become incredibly time-consuming. (Hannah, lines 457-459)

E-learning as a threat to ontological security

With academic identity, or 'professional personality' (Taylor, Lopez and Quadrelli 1996) and 'teacher presence' (Wells 2005) so firmly established through the face-to-face classroom and acknowledgement as the subject expert, the adoption of e-learning that requires the development of a new disembodied identity and a willingness to accede the position as knowledge gatekeeper is bound to be considered cautiously by many academics.

With no sense of achievement of successful e-learning to support the construction of an identity as an e-learning academic, they appeared to be filtering out threats to their identity using the 'protective cocoon' of their positive student experiences (Giddens 1991). They fell back upon their strongly established links with their students as justification for their reluctance to use e-learning because students and their learning are important and student learning seems to take place effectively in the classroom environment. It is likely to be extremely difficult to mandate the use of e-learning in this context and may result in a sense of displacement and expressions of anger.

While academics were reluctant to voluntarily adopt e-learning because of a perceived threat to their academic identity, mandating its use absolutely horrified them. Duncan

was participating in a managerially imposed e-learning project which was clearly disrupting his former successful practice and causing him great concern:

We are all sort of groping about with experimentation, dealing with all sorts of imponderables, worried to death about when it all happens and whether it will work. (Duncan, lines 498-500)

This inability to act competently as a teacher as he was beginning to use e-learning was really upsetting him. He needed a refuge to support his sense of ontological security, as identified by Taylor (1997) where he would have an opportunity to rehearse new practices associated with e-learning before he used it with his students.

Several respondents made self-deprecating remarks to the researcher about their lack of innovativeness, referring to themselves as “a stick-in-the-mud” and “naughty” for not being more ready to embrace e-learning. These expressions of shame provide further evidence of their inability to sustain their successful narratives when faced with e-learning, thus undermining their ontological security.

Concluding comments

Previous research has identified that the impact of e-learning on the role of the academic requires “faculty members to think about themselves very differently as instructors, recognising the changes in the educational paradigm, engage in new kinds of activities, and reconsider the meaning of being an expert” (Conceicao 2006, 44). However, there was little to suggest that these academics had begun to view themselves in this way. As Taylor found, academics have to become accustomed to ‘(dis)embodiment’ as an important milestone in learning more about student learning in e-learning settings (Taylor, Lopez and Quadrelli 1996,131).

The concerns of these ‘mainstream’ academics about e-learning arise from a strong desire to protect what has become established as a very powerful feature of their academic identity, their close and successful face-to-face relationship with their students. Resisting e-learning is in fact an entirely rational act designed to strengthen a relationship based on ‘being there’ with the students, despite the diminishing quality of that relationship due to the pressure of increased student numbers and changing student expectations. They are not yet prepared to embrace the ‘disembodiment’ or ‘re-positioning’ required by e-learning. However, their inability to use learning technologies may quickly become detrimental to their relationships with students, who are demonstrating a growing ability to access a far wider range of knowledge than that offered by academics, to synthesise and publish their findings, often in collaboration with their peers and using technologies far removed from the academics’ own experience. This small scale study points to a need for further investigation into the impact of e-learning on academic identity, a factor which has not so far replaced academics, but may be displacing them.

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