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Article

Reflections on an Academic Leadership Approach to Implementing Digital Education in Higher Education

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to reflect upon personal experiences with a Foucauldian-inspired academic leadership approach to implementing digital education at the University of Bristol. Higher Education Institutions across the UK often invest in digital infrastructure and central support teams (technical and educational) and expect these investments alone to be the main vehicles to achieve digital education. While clearly, having technologies and support play a key role in digital education, according to my experience the implementation of digital education is complex and requires focused and scholarly leadership to drive it. This is because I argue that digital education can be considered a ‘discourse’, in the Foucauldian sense, of our era whose implementation involves considerable social change. Through my work as the academic person first responsible for digital education in the School of Modern Languages and then across the Faculty of Arts at the University of Bristol, I will unpack how having someone with the appropriate practical and theoretical expertise leading the digital education agenda brought positive impacts before and during the pandemic. Drawing on reflections from years of academic leadership, I will consider questions such as: What practices can lead the digital education discourse to advance in HE settings? And, which agents in HE can develop these practices? This theoretical-oriented discussion grounded on personal experience can be useful for institutions making decisions about how to take digital education forward. Indeed, as we emerge from the pandemic, universities are in the process of choosing whether to go back to a pre-COVID time characterised by a power struggle between different educational discourses, which often meant that the digital education discourse remained marginal, or whether to embrace and invest more in digital education and associated academic leadership.

Keywords: digital education; academic leadership; implementation; discourse; Foucault; universities; higher education; personal experience; reflections



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1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to illustrate an example of academic leadership aimed at advancing digital education in Higher Education (HE). Indeed, ideas of digital education have been around for decades [1–3], but they do not always reach educators and their teaching methods [4–6]. This was also evident during the COVID-19 pandemic when online activities were extensively adopted but they were not always informed by pedagogical digital educational principles [7].

I will start this personal reflection by positioning the discipline of digital education in a particular theoretical (Foucauldian) context which will redefine digital education as a ‘discourse’ of our time. This perspective will lead to certain questions that will be discussed through an example of implementation developed from my own practice as the academic responsible for digital education in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Bristol.

2. The Theoretical Context

As a social constructivist, I wish to discuss digital education in the context of the French philosopher Michel Foucault’s interpretation of reality because this will bring a greater understanding of the discipline. This interpretation of reality matches my constructivist

ontology where one universal reality valid for all people, an absolute reality, does not exist; rather, there are multiple socially constructed representations of realities [8–10].

To Foucault too, reality is not one and absolute, but is constructed through a plurality of discourses; or, we might say, a plurality of non-coherent discourses [11]. By ‘discourse’, the French philosopher means two things. Firstly, a discourse is ‘*an individualizable group of statements and . . . regulated practice that accounts for a number of statements*’ [11] (p. 80).

Discourse, thus conceived by Foucault, is not what we understand in everyday language as a discussion of a subject in speech or writing, such as a sermon or a political speech. Foucault goes beyond such a common-sense definition and refers to discourse as a set of concepts and practices through which agents act [11]. By practices, Foucault refers to regulated practices, such as regulations, laws, administrative measures and scientific statements [11].

Examples of what Foucault means by discourses might be: political discourses, religious discourses, globalisation discourses, climate change discourses, terrorism discourses and so on. To Foucault, all discourses contain, in turn, a number of competing and contradictory discourses. For instance, Foucault explains that the political discourse is uniform as an area of interest but within this area there are a variety of non-coherent discourses, such as the right-wing and the socialist discourses on democracy [12].

Secondly, the French philosopher also understands discourse as ‘*the general domain of all statements*’ [11] (p. 80). In other words, discourse, or ‘episteme’, as Foucault also refers to this notion, includes the theoretical assumptions and beliefs of any particular time by means of which we make sense of the world [11].

To give an example, the belief of the supernatural was one of the theoretical assumptions of the Classical era’s discourse. Crop failure, storms, diseases and, in fact, any event judged to be exceptional was seen to be indicative of God’s anger [12]. In *The Order of Things*, Foucault identified four such epistemes in Western history: the Medieval (appeared around the sixteenth century), the Renaissance (emerged around the 1400s), the Classical (formed toward the middle of the seventeenth century) and the Modern (appeared in the eighteenth century) [13].

Today, among all the different views of our era, I agree with David Harvey, for example, and argue that we live in a late modern era characterised by a mixture of modern and postmodern ideas, beliefs and traditions [14]. This might be more clearly identified by the shifting paradigms of scientific proof from the positivism of early modernist thought to the increasing influence of the qualitative approaches of post structuralists such as Baudrillard and Derrida [15,16].

I have chosen this Foucauldian approach as a tool for reflection because it helps redefine and treat education as a discursive construct. Indeed, Foucault’s concepts allows us to identify Higher Education teaching as a discourse of today’s episteme, characterised by a multitude of interpolating and contradictory specific discourses—each composed by a set of statements and regulated practices. For example, there is a dominant discourse in favour of in-person teaching but also a digital education discourse that is the result of the arrival of the internet.

For the purposes of this article, I use the term digital education discourse interchangeably with the terms e-learning discourse or technology-enhanced learning discourse. They all describe ideas and practices which value the use of technology in education and see the pedagogical potential of digital practice across a variety of teaching and learning formats (such as blended, hybrid, and distant). Digital teaching methods can indeed help bring out learners’ full potential by supporting/enhancing a range of learning skills, such as independent thinking, self-reflection, digital literacy and collaboration [17–20].

Nowadays, UK universities often include ideas of digital education in their institutional practices, such as university policies [21–23]. However, despite this commitment, the digital education discourse is not often embraced by educators on the ground [4–7]. With this paper I wish to explore how this can be changed and how digital education can be

implemented at scale—which is as yet largely unexplored in the literature—by offering an example of implementation developed at the University of Bristol.

3. Reflective Questions Drawn from Foucauldian Notions of Social Transformation

As I look back on the way Bristol started to implement digital education, the following questions will guide my reflections:

What practices can lead the digital education discourse to advance in HE settings? And, which agents in HE can develop these practices?

These questions are informed by discourse theory. Indeed, Foucault explains discourse formation, permanence and transformation through the circulation of numerous institutional and regulated practices, such as legal texts, political statements and scientific reports which set or reinforce the discourse concepts and ideas. In his words ‘in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures’ [24] (p. 52).

For example, in his career Foucault analysed the discourses of madness, punishment and sexuality, and came to the conclusion that they were produced through a whole array of regulated practices, such as legal texts, literature, political acts, etc. [25]. In *Madness and Civilization*, for instance, Foucault described practices like psychiatric procedures, legal acts and political decisions to explain how in modern society people have arrived to regard madness as a mental illness [26].

Social transformation like discourse formation, thus, does not happen by the hands of pre-existing forces such as ‘power’ or ‘class interests’. To Foucault, there are no pre-existing forces; he does not believe in a priori realities. For example, power, to Foucault, is not the property of a particular social actor (the ruling class for example) or located in a particular institution (such as the state) [27]. Power is diffused all over society, everywhere where there is a relationship of force [27].

To the French philosopher, individuals and institutions can only be powerful if other subjects of the same social context recognise their power through discourses and practices. As a result, social transformation is the result of practices that come out of agents who have been recognised as powerful by others [27].

4. An Approach to Digital Education Implementation at the University of Bristol

The article questions are now considered by reflecting on the digital education discourse at the University of Bristol. With a focus on the Faculty of Arts, I have chosen this example because it is informative, and because I know it well. Indeed, it has come out of my own work as the digital education academic leader in the School of Modern Language first and then in the Faculty of Arts (of which SML is part of) at Bristol.

To set the context, here is a brief historical account of how the digital education discourse has emerged at the University of Bristol over the years. Based on Foucault’s notions of discourse formation via institutional and regulated practices [24–26], this account is a description of the University-wide digital education practices at Bristol.

4.1. *The Digital Education Discourse at the University of Bristol*

At the University of Bristol, the digital education discourse began to emerge in 2005 when the University bought the virtual learning environment, Blackboard (Bb), and invested in a central support team (the Digital Education Office, part of the Education Department). Initially the team was advised by a small group of academics, called the Technology Enhanced Learning Academic Network (TELAN). Over time the support team has grown and been reorganised. It has also acquired more digital tools to support.

On top of the support team and Blackboard, other significant institutional practices that have helped the emergence of the digital education discourse have been:

- The publication of a Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) Strategy (in 2013);
- The funding, development, and launch of two massive open online courses (MOOCs) (between 2013–2015);

- The purchase and implementation of Mediasite, a technology that records lessons (between 2015–2016);
- The launch of a new University of Bristol Education Policy which mentions e-learning tools, blended environments and innovation (2017) [28];
- The funding, development and release of three online courses available to University of Bristol students as part of the Bristol Futures programme (2016–2018);
- The appointment of a Director for the Bristol Institute for Learning and Teaching (BILT) with a portfolio that includes digital education (2019).

While these practices were important in supporting the digital education discourse, they had not been enough to change the teaching practice on the ground. Indeed, when the pandemic hit the UK in March 2020 only few academics had been engaging in digital practices. The digital education discourse was still marginal at Bristol compared to other institutional discourses. And, apart from the use of lecture capture technology, which was required across the institution, digital education was prevalent only in those schools and faculties like the Faculty of Arts which themselves supported the digital education discourse via their own (more local) institutional practices, such as the employment of digital education academic leaders.

When, during the pandemic, teaching moved online and digital practice became widespread by default, further institutional practices pro-digital education were developed to support colleagues in this transition. For example, the PVC Education offered pedagogical advice and guidelines on how to teach online. The DEO organised training sessions on technologies, suggested new educational initiatives (i.e., the use of Blackboard templates) and designed new processes (for running online exams, for instance).

However, despite this increase in central support and institutional practices, it was the more local digital education academic leadership—when available—that made a difference in the digital transition during the pandemic [29]. Indeed, the digital initiatives suggested by the University had no implementation plans attached. Thus, in the Faculty of Arts, for example, it was me as the person responsible for digital education, with the support of the Faculty Education Director (FED) and a small support team, who narrowed the gap and—by collaborating with the central support teams—turned the suggested initiatives into actual digital projects (such as the use of Blackboard templates and online exams).

4.2. The Faculty of Arts

This section describes how the Faculty of Arts has engaged with the University of Bristol digital education discourse, and the wider digital education ideas too. In particular, it reflects upon what practices have led to the digital education discourse to advance over the years.

When Blackboard was purchased in 2005, it did not come with an implementation strategy. People could choose to use it or not. Teaching was mainly seen as face-to-face and less of a driver than research and, thus, most people decided not to use Blackboard [30]. In the Faculty of Arts, it was only in 2009 when a new FED was appointed that the expectation that academics were required to use Blackboard emerged. Such expectation continued over the years with the next FEDs. This led to the Bb sites being used more in the Faculty, although mainly as repositories of information and not for teaching and learning.

The only exceptions were the School of Modern Languages (SML) and the Centre for Academic Language and Development (CALD) where there had been an awareness at senior level of the wider digital education debate which was, in turn, reflected in a local investment pro-digital education. Indeed, SML and CALD had tasked academics with a digital education background to take e-learning practice (or technology-enhanced learning, as it was known then) forward. This practice of creating digital education academic leaders whose job was to disseminate digital education ideas and practices led to better and more widespread usage of the VLE and digital practice more generally.

Between 2011–2017, I was one of the people appointed to take further the digital practice. I was made the Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) Director for the School

of Modern Languages. At that time, the school employed over 50 permanent academics, across five departments, who together with several temporary language teachers taught around 2000 students across two undergraduate and a range of postgraduate programmes.

Over the years, my work triggered substantial digital education practice across the school that involved the use of a range of technologies, and supported a blended approach to teaching. My thinking and actions have been informed by the digital education discourse that was developing nationally [18,31–34], which was discussed in the literature but also at events organised, for instance, by the Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies (LLAS) and the Association for Learning Technology (ALT). Some examples of the digital education practice I facilitated include online tutorials my colleagues developed to reinforce concepts covered in the classroom; online discussion forums to encourage active/reflective learning, and wikis to produce/edit compositions in a collaborative way. As for assessment, a few colleagues across the school started using online quizzes to assess factual knowledge and critical thinking. Some people also began using audio-visual projects as an alternative method to class presentations where students were asked to focus on a specific topic and produce short videos in pairs or small groups. In relation to feedback, some people started providing online written feedback to essays and compositions, others used audio feedback and a few experimented with peer feedback.

When I first started in 2011, there was a lot of scepticism towards technology-enhanced learning—which is understandable given how new the digital education discourse was at Bristol. There was also some kind of uniformity in the way people were thinking about it. Some of the most common storylines I was hearing when talking to colleagues about TEL were:

TEL is about spoon-feeding students; If we are not careful, TEL will replace our F2F lectures and seminars; I hate Blackboard; I would need some support to implement TEL; TEL is not for me; Students are not complaining about my teaching, why should I change my teaching methods?; I don't have time to engage with TEL.

This attraction to similar storylines is what Marteen Hajer, a Foucauldian-inspired scholar, calls a 'discourse-coalition' [25]. To try and make sense of complex and interconnected realities/discourses, discourse-coalitions are formed every day by all of us in relation to numerous subjects/discourses, such as: criminality, immigration, education, the property market, etc. Indeed, there are very few people, if any at all, who can actually understand realities/discourses in all their detail without reducing or summarising them to shorter narratives like one-liners or sound bites [25].

The advantage of being able to identify a discourse-coalition is that it captures and sums up the thinking of many people behind certain practices or concepts. The discourse-coalition I found at the School of Modern Languages highlighted, that overall colleagues' storylines were not based on actual TEL practice or research and literature. It was becoming clear that people were simply unfamiliar with the TEL discourse.

To change this trend and move forward the implementation of digital practice within the school, a Foucauldian-inspired approach was taken. Teaching colleagues were introduced to the TEL discourse by using a two levels strategy: (1) the information/language level (to disseminate new ideas about TEL), and (2) the practice level (to encourage colleagues to pilot and experiment with new teaching methods). Indeed, as a discourse is a set of concepts and practices through which agents act, the approach specifically addressed the language and practice level [11]. And it did so, through the active circulation of regulated practices—which is in line with how social transformation happens according to Foucault [24]. However, over time the approach evolved and came to rely on less regulated practices too as I realised that they were an effective way to educate people.

In terms of the information/language level approach, new TEL ideas were introduced by a mixture of practices (regulated and less regulated), such as: policies, documents, reports, updates at assemblies, TEL seminars and conferences, meetings, informal chats, emails, and so on.

Collectively these practices allowed the introduction of more accurate digital education ideas. Here are some examples of the new storylines that were introduced:

TEL methods can help enhance students' skills such as independent thinking, self-reflection, digital literacy and collaboration; TEL can support pupils' learning in different, meaningful and new ways; Experimenting with TEL is about updating current teaching methodologies; TEL practice can be small-scale and effective; Small-scale TEL practice does not require advanced IT skills to be implemented.

When talking to colleagues, and helping them adopt a particular technology, I also used more specific and pedagogically focused narratives to describe, for example, the learning benefits technologies can facilitate and how to design activities for digital learning.

As for the practice level approach, yet again, regulated and less regulated practices were used to try and improve three things: (1) equipment and learning resources, (2) technical support and (3) IT training opportunities, so that colleagues would find it easier to experiment with TEL.

This meant: writing new protocols and service agreement; organising a range of school-based training sessions; buying new equipment; lobbying for the Faculty or University to buy extra learning resources; writing and disseminating written instructions on technologies available; collaborating with University support teams to arrange consultation sessions with staff or fix/install equipment.

Indeed, to make sure that this approach would work, it became very important that the TEL discourse and what was stopping its implementation was discussed among those support teams too and not just among academic colleagues. These support teams play a key role in the delivery of innovative teaching practice—which, in our case, at Bristol, are (1) the Digital Education Office, (2) IT Services, and (3) Estates. In fact, the implementation of TEL is not only dependent on the response of academics but also on the work of many other people who are part of different support teams. As a result, the discourse/narrative about TEL needs to make sense to all of them to guarantee its long-term future.

When this example of implementation started, the school was experiencing a number of IT issues such as poor or slow programme installations, unreliable servers, slow personal and classroom computers. The work of the Digital Education Office was also not very effective. They had been providing training and help on Blackboard, QuestionMark Perception, WimbaCreate and some other tools for a number of years across the University but these had not generated a very widespread innovative teaching practice, at least not within Modern Languages.

As the person who encouraged colleagues to use technology, I felt responsible and started dealing with the support teams directly to try and solve the issues, while conveying how important it was to support academic colleagues who were experimenting with new teaching methods. This process required a vast number of practices such as meetings, conversations and emails which, over time, improved matters and the support people received from the central teams—although there are still further enhancements to be made in this area.

As a result of my work in the School and Modern Languages, at the end of 2017 the Faculty promoted me to a faculty digital education position with the view to introduce digital practice and ideas in all the Schools and Centres of the Faculty, and not just in SML. Yet again, when I first started, I found that colleagues were sceptical about digital education, in the same way that SML was in 2011. To change things, a similar Foucauldian-inspired approach to the one used at Modern Languages was adopted. In other words, through a number of practices (regulated and less regulated), I started to implement the digital education discourse by encouraging digital teaching/learning activities and by talking and writing about digital education in a new way, focusing on the learning benefits that digital practice can offer students and their learning process. I also dealt with the barriers to innovation (such as lack of support, training, guidelines, technology, too many processes to support).

By the time the pandemic hit, digital practice across the Faculty was growing with online marking having been implemented throughout the Faculty, and digital education pilots taking place in several departments. This involved working with many different stakeholders, including the administrative teams. Given the size of the Faculty and my limited resources, the adoption of digital methods was happening slower than in SML. The pandemic, however, changed things and by April 2020 all academic staff, not just in the Faculty but across the institution, were using digital methods to deliver their teaching.

The move happened very fast. While some support was offered centrally (in the form of pedagogical advice and training by the PVC Education and the DEO), the shift to online relied mainly on the efforts of individual academics. This led to digital teaching/learning practice that was not always of a high pedagogical standard/quality—which is unsurprising as most people were still unfamiliar with digital education ideas, let alone the more specific ideas about remote teaching that the April 2020 move required.

As a result, after that initial transition to online delivery, it became clear that more needed to be done to enhance our digital education pedagogy. Thus, for example, when the University suggested that the Blackboard sites—which, during the pandemic, represented our classrooms—needed to be improved, I wrote a project proposal aimed at enhancing our 800+ Bb sites, which included a pedagogical rationale and a description of what the new sites would look like. The project (also known as the Blackboard Template Project) was informed by the experience and knowledge I gathered when developing distance-learning courses (a MOOC on Cultural Studies and Modern Languages, and the Bristol Futures Global Citizenship course) [35,36].

Two years into the project, now all 800+ sites have been improved. They are consistent, modern and with a layout that is informed by distance-learning principles which makes them effective virtual classrooms and have led to positive feedback from the students who regularly tell us in staff-student liaison meetings how much they appreciate the sites' consistency, look and way in which they are organised.

To make this possible and get the project off the ground and approved, leadership and digital education knowledge were important. My academic digital education scholarship was helpful in articulating the project and made the proposal credible, whereas my leadership role allowed me to correctly position the project for approval.

Once the project proposal was approved, the implementation phase required further leadership. Indeed, the use of the new Bb sites represented a significant cultural change for academics, and digital education academic leadership was needed (1) to make a case for the formation of a faculty digital team, and (2) to guide the team in disseminating digital education ideas and practices through meetings, instructions, workshops, etc.— and in providing support.

Another example where digital education academic leadership was important was the transition during the pandemic from on-campus to online exams. The University tasked the DEO and Exams Office with developing the online solution for those subjects that needed to deliver online exams, such as our language units. While the technical solution was overall well designed, it needed some key modifications to match our educational requirements and digital processes (i.e., online student assignment submissions).

For this project, my digital education knowledge was important in informing the internal evaluation/review that suggested the modifications, while my leadership position triggered and led the review and put together the reviewers. Collectively, we designed and implemented modifications to the original solution which refined the online exam processes and allowed for the exams to run smoothly in our Faculty and be an overall positive assessment experience for our students [29].

5. Impact of Digital Education Academic Leadership

This section describes some of the positive impacts the ideas and practices I developed as digital educational academic leader, have led to at Bristol. This personal narrative, pieced from a range of sources, will show how the decision/investment (or, in Foucauldian terms,

institutional practice) of employing a digital education academic leader has been a positive one. The point of this is not to glorify my work, but to signal the positive impact digital education academic leaders can have.

There is an overall assumption in digital education literature that the more we discuss digital education ideas/practices, the more likely these will get implemented. Such an assumption is evident from the relatively small number of studies focusing on the strategies to implement digital education at scale, versus the majority which focus mainly on describing actual digital education activities. While I recognise the importance of the latter discussion, we should also acknowledge that the digital education discourse was a marginal discourse before the pandemic (at any rate not as dominant as the face-to-face teaching discourse). And, even during the pandemic, while digital education practice grew exponentially, the pedagogical digital education ideas/principles on how to design for digital did not always follow. As a result, I argue here that there is a need to look at how we facilitate the implementation of both digital education practices and ideas as we emerge from the pandemic, and suggest that having digital academic figures in leadership positions is invaluable. Indeed, digital education academic leaders can facilitate the social change/transformation the implementation of digital education requires and bring great impact, for both teachers and students, as argued in this section.

Indeed, as TEL Director, over the past ten years I have led 100+ digital education projects. These were informed by digital education literature and tailored to a variety of learning objectives/preferences. Collectively, the projects involved staff in SML (and some across the Faculty) and ranged from activities to improve units by advancing student knowledge/skills in exciting modern ways—carried out by up to 150 students and created through many technologies like apps, language labs, voting systems, digital discussion boards, etc.—to programme-level TEL practice like the audio-visual videos to push forward the multimedia learning of 1300 students, or the School migration to online marking of hundreds of assignments to enhance students' performance through focused, legible and accessible feedback.

One project I inspired and facilitated received the globally renowned Apereo Teaching/Learning Award, two won the Bristol Educational Award, and five were replicated in other universities with my contribution—raising the national/international profile of teaching and learning and the people awarded.

By 2017, according to the then Head of School,

'... all staff were embracing innovation. Gloria inspired a new attitude towards teaching excellence and TEL across the School... Through her guidance, people's skills, knowledge and overall confidence grew and now a wide range of cutting-edge teaching methods are used, creating transformative learning that produces highly skilled graduates.'

Colleagues have regularly expressed appreciation for the pedagogical support as illustrated below:

'[the TEL Director]... introduced me to new ideas of teaching. The expert advice was instrumental in creating projects that have made a difference to my students' learning like the audio-visual project that helped them develop more persuasive and rich stories than those produced with compositions.'

Today, SML staff are dedicated and able to adopt digital education methods because they saw how transformative they can be. Their observations on how digital methods improved student outcomes and performances were often captured in School Reports (2012–2017) [37]:

'Through VoiceThread, students have mastered their ability to analyse films, while acquiring a better understanding of French culture... and the ability to collaborate.'

'Following the introduction of the online grammar course combined with the self-assessed quizzes, Y2 students [of German] are reaching higher levels of grammatical proficiency and becoming more assured independent learners.'

Students also talked about TEL activities and their impact in Unit Surveys and Staff-Student-Liaison-Committees [38,39]. And, from 2013 students started mentioning in the NSSs how the TEL activities made a difference to their learning [40].

Through leadership and encouragement, several colleagues in SML are actively researching in the field of teaching and learning. Many had never presented at a teaching and learning conference before, but they now have original teaching practice to share. Collectively, staff dissemination has had a national/international impact in the modern-languages sector, as pointed out by Professor Kate Borthwick,

‘... Since the appointment of a TEL Director, modern language staff from Bristol started disseminating a range of high-quality and impactful research. This has advanced the practice and academic thinking of TEL [in our sector] ... as well as made Bristol known as a hub for TEL excellence’.

Finally, this pioneering approach—which resulted in a vastly increased staff commitment to digital innovation, a new school and institutional culture around TEL and a state-of-the-art education for SML students—has been recognised by the Association for Learning Technology as:

‘unique in the field ... a new bottom-up model of educational change and TEL implementation in Higher Education has been developed. With limited means, the focus on raising teaching and learning standards through technology, effective pedagogical support and putting people at the heart of institutional change is exemplary’ (Dr Maren Deepwell, ALT Chief Executive).

More recently, work at the faculty level has been recognised by the current Faculty Education Director who has acknowledged the importance of a digital education academic leader and the positive changes it has brought. According to him,

‘The Blackboard Template Project was the first whole-Faculty digital change project undertaken in an emergency. The project involved all staff in a complex Faculty which includes programmes as diverse as Theatre and Modern Languages. To lead the project, the Digital Education Leader had to consult widely with different stakeholders, quickly iterate, anticipate technical or pedagogic design problems, and ensure the rollout was well supported at a time of immense change. Previously, students often experienced our VLE as a collection of unrelated sites. Some were excellent but all had different navigation structures and the quality of user design and content varied within single sites. The Template Project brought a better balance between consistency and tutor design; it allowed our students to quickly find content in locations already familiar to them, but it also enabled us to deliver the Faculty’s pedagogic vision of blended education by structuring all sites around a student’s week on their course, rather than expecting them to piece together online lectures and seminars from different areas of a site. Our survey data showed that students who felt their sites were well-organised also felt more confident with blended learning generally and we noted significant differences in experience where a small number of programmes had delayed implementation. Student representatives were especially positive about the changes and explained that greater consistency had helped them focus on course content rather than re-learning how and where to find it. As a Faculty Education Director, collaborating with the Digital Education Leader enabled me to bring about rapid educational improvements at the same time as managing a crisis and planning for an uncertain future. The end results of this partnership between co-ordinated design and unit tutors have benefitted well over 100 programmes and more than 5000 students each year.’ (Dr James Freeman, Faculty Education Director)

6. Discussion and Conclusions

Based on the positive impacts at the University of Bristol before and during the pandemic, I believe that having digital education academics/scholars in leadership positions at school and faculty-level—rather than simply having support staff—is a valuable way

for universities to take the digital education discourse (meaning both digital education practices and pedagogical ideas) forward and make it more widespread.

Indeed, in reflecting on the questions: What practices can lead the digital education discourse to advance in HE settings? And, which agents in HE can develop these practices?, I hope that I have shown convincingly that the adoption of digital education ideas and methods is complex and involves substantial change for both academics and professional service colleagues. It requires shifting firmly entrenched ideas and practices about teaching and the way teaching is supported.

According to the Bristol example discussed, this kind of transformation needs dedicated digital education agents who are familiar with the digital education discourse and who can lead on and develop those practices aimed at disseminating and making the digital education ideas and methods better understood and more widespread.

However, such practices did not need to be just regulated practices as suggested by Foucault. While they are important and were used in SML and in the Faculty of Arts (i.e., institutional statements, protocols), my experience suggests that change can also be generated via less formal and regulated practices, such as emails, meetings, events and training sessions, etc.

This view is more in line with the Foucauldian-inspired approach by Hajer [25]. Indeed, to him discourses are composed of sets of ideas which are not reproduced through regulated practice only, but through all sorts of discursive practice, meaning ‘all the ways in which people actively produce social and psychological realities’—day to day actions, written documents, verbal reports, spoken words, pictures, symbols and even silence [25] (p. 53).

Collectively, the regulated and less regulated practices were key in generating social change and leading to a more widespread adoption of digital education in SML and the Faculty of Arts. This underlines that it is unrealistic to expect teaching staff to update their teaching methods simply because they can access new technologies and central support or training.

The digital education discourse is a relatively new discourse at Bristol and, as such, it needs to be reinforced via an active circulation of practices, which requires strong school and faculty subject-specific leadership to be able to: address misconceptions, change the language, develop implementation strategies, take care of barriers that can prevent innovative practices and so on.

Some might expect that existing educational leaders should lead on the digital agenda given that the digital educational discourse is an educational discourse. This, however, is not always possible as such leaders may lack the workload capacity or the digital background. If we take the blended learning agenda, for example, it can be challenging to find leaders who can lead on both the face-to-face as well as the online side of teaching.

So, until more educational leaders have the appropriate digital education knowledge (and workload capacity), universities—if committed to the digital education discourse—should invest in additional school and faculty digital education academic leaders who value and understand the discourse and can work alongside university leaders and support teams to bring it to the educators on the ground.

Given the complexities involved in introducing digital education practice and ideas, universities might also want to think about what digital education academic leadership is needed at the university level. This is also an important part of the theoretical understanding of digital education implementation in higher education institutions. Indeed, institution-wide practices, such as university policies or investments, when coordinated with the work and leadership of schools and faculties can really move forward the application of digital education. Such a relationship between the different levels of leadership—university, faculty and school—was not discussed in this article but will be the focus of future research.

In conclusion, this paper acknowledges that, with the arrival of the internet, digital teaching/learning methods are here to stay and evolve at least to some degree even if we go back to a more face-to-face-teaching format. The pandemic has shown that people can use

digital methods, but they are generally less familiar with digital education pedagogy [7]. How to change that in the future is the crucial issue here. And the answer, drawn from my reflections, is that we need to invest in digital education academic leadership governance—similar to the positions described in this paper—aimed at deliberately and thoughtfully explaining and facilitating the digital education discourse. Without investing in this type of academic governance and only focusing on digital training and technical support or buying new technologies, we will fail to recognise how complex digital education is and what a big change an appropriate and effective adoption of digital methods represents for an institution and its people.

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