Balancing Acts: Developing Online Professional Identities

The paper will explore research being undertaken with graduates from an undergraduate Professional Practice in Arts programme at Middlesex University. As a part of their course, students are asked to communicate using social media and interactive online peer groups. The research examines how graduates have responded to the curriculum approach using online technologies whilst on the programme and after they have graduated and continued employment. Special areas of interest for these emerging and establishing professionals include flexible, co-constructed interaction and how this practice might facilitate lifelong learning. As Kettle points out: "The challenge for HE is how to translate the requirements of working life into the educational practices in institutions" (2013, p. 6).

Pedagogy on the programme includes many ideas to underpin engagement in a peer network community of practice (Wenger, 1998; Wenger et al., 2009; Wenger- Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2015). The pedagogy for the programme has built on earlier development (Bryant, Akinleye, Durrant, 2013) and the concepts of connectivity use progressive use of educational technologies (Siemens, 2005; Siemens, 2016). Other influences include: professionalism (Lester, 2002); work-based projects (Boud and Costley, 2007); work-based learning pedagogy (Nottingham, 2016); and professional learning (Eraut, 2007). The pedagogy relates to establishing professional identities (Pittman and Foubert, 2016) as well as the use of social media in education (Luehmann, 2008; Lewis, Pea, and Rosen, 2010). The philosophy about online learning embraces Laurillard's position that technological innovation in higher education needs to be informed and enabled by pedagogical imperatives (2008); also considered were e-tivities (Salmon, 2002) and the value of digital literacies (Goodfellow, 2002).

The ongoing research is using qualitative interviews and content/multimodal analysis (Jewitt, 2009) of online sites to review the use of social media and interactive peer activity. The data explored in this paper is about the interview phase now being undertaken. The nature of the inquiry is interpretive (Cohen et al., 2007), the research has gathered data to develop an understanding of online identity held by graduates and the meanings they have given to their learning/educational activities. The participants, interviewed separately with informed consent, were purposively chosen, and emerging findings are discussed using thematic analysis (Mason, 2002).

In the first emerging finding, graduates indicated that while they understood the purposes of connecting with others on the course, they found it challenging to adapt to the use of online blogs and communicating publicly:

> …[the] internet is something as a communication device
> that always makes me a bit awkward as I'm never too sure
> as to who is on the other side of the line. So when it came
> to using networks and social media for BAPP, at first it was
> hard, it was something that I had to accept for myself, that I
> had to get used to (Participant A).

While the use of social media is now pervasive, engaging in online conversations for learning often requires a period of ethical and emotional adjustment. As Jarvis

explained transforming experience requires: "thinking as a way of learning; doing as a way of learning; and feeling (experience emotion) as a way of learning" (2006, p. 18).

The next finding relates to how online engagement impacts a greater understanding of how to negotiate autonomy (Lester, 2002). This relates to graduates' perceptions of 'study' activities translated to professional roles. As Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner have pointed out: "learning is not merely the acquisition of knowledge. It is the becoming of a person who inhabits the landscape with an identity whose dynamic construction reflects our trajectory through that landscape" (2015, p. 19).

> I've still got Facebook and I'm on LinkedIn which was something that I started when I was on the BAPP course, but everything is a lot more calculated about what I put up now…. I'm very very careful about what I put up now because I think that thing where people will Google you now is such a normal thing, and also, working in [practice] … I have quite a lot of ownership over it and I try and not share everything… (Participant B).

Casey and Wilson point out that the 'value' in using flexible learning relies on teaching, interaction and creating the right conditions for learning (2005). Here the flexible online learning from the programme has translated into skillsets that are useful to professional 'digital habitats' (Wenger et al., 2009).

The final emerging finding is that alumni have been able to use the knowledge gained from coursework to more readily impact professional practice because many workplaces now expect experience with social media. This way of working embraces Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner's position that participating in landscapes of practice shape the experience of identity through engagement, imagination and alignment (2015).

> …my [work] has moved to a new process of performance management… we have blogs and websites and we track our journey of what we've done and then we present them at the end of the year… well of course I wasn't fazed by having a blog, I've done many blogs now, but yeah, put it up on a blog and then you present it back, it's a visual culmination of your practice really (Participant E).

In conclusion, as the study set out to see if this way of working engaged students with lifelong learning skills, and that element seems to have been mainly positive. The emerging findings have already been useful in planning other online provision for learning based in the workplace within my institution. The research is ongoing there will likely be other issues that graduates will identify from the studies and current practice. I will also looking at evidence from the online sites in terms of how the students used multimodal approaches to develop their identities as professionals and how they applied this knowledge of themselves and their learning frameworks back to their professional practice. This research seems to indicate that as communication is based on social interaction, it will be increasingly important for academics to become digital scholars (Weller, 2011).

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