203 Digital Educators: Figuring an identity in the world of Higher Education

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Research Domains

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Abstract

This presentation provides an insight into how academic and professional services staff have engaged with digitally enabled pedagogies across a range of modes of delivery in a UK university. The overarching aim of the research was to understand the opportunities and challenges digitally enabled technologies had afforded them. The study is framed through sociocultural theories of identity and agency, specifically Figured Worlds (Holland et al, 1998). Utilising photo elicitation as a research tool, staff perceptions of their digital capabilities and the factors that had informed their perceptions were explored. We outline how the findings from the study have informed the development of a self-evaluation professional development model based on seven typologies of digital educators. Additionally, we reflect on the role of the university in creating the appropriate conditions that provide staff with the capabilities to influence their own professional development and transformation into new figured worlds.

Full paper

Twenty first century university educators are increasingly utilising digitally enabled pedagogies (DEP). The Covid 19 global pandemic accelerated this shift, requiring them to enter new virtual and digital territories. For some, this was a welcome opportunity to explore the 'possibilities and potentials' that digital technologies afford (Markelj and Sundvall, 2023), whilst for others it was a 'disorientating' and unwelcome experience (Watermeyer, Crick, Knight and Goodall, 2021). Post pandemic, the HE sectors face a 'fork in the road' (Emerge Education and Jisc, 2020) regarding the future of digital learning. If the sector is to capitalise on the increased digital capabilities remote learning has afforded, regardless of the mode of delivery, then there needs to be personalised support and professional development that is relevant to the confidence and competence of the individual.

This paper provides an insight into how academic and professional services staff have engaged with DEP across a range of modes of delivery in a UK university. The overarching aim of the study was to understand the opportunities and challenges digitally enabled technologies had afforded them. By exploring individual experiences, it enabled us to identify how individuals perceived their digital capabilities and understand the factors that had informed their perceptions. Findings from the study informed the development of a self-evaluation professional development model based on seven typologies of digital educators.

The theoretical framework for this study was based on sociocultural theories of identity and agency, drawing specifically on Figured Worlds. Figured worlds are understood as "socially produced, culturally constituted activities (Holland, Skinner, Lachicotte and Cain, 1998: 40-41). Through day-to-day social activity, individuals come to 'figure' who they are through the 'worlds' that they participate in and how they relate to others both within and outside of those worlds (Urrieta, 2007:107). This perspective resonated with our research intentions, as we recognised that each participant in the study inhabited multiple, often competing worlds that influenced how they engaged with DEP.

The study utilised the methodological principles of photo elicitation (Pink 2007). This approach aligned with a figured world perspective, as it allowed for the exploration of how individuals interpret and assign meaning to abstract concepts to form their own 'figured world'. Participants from the university's teaching and professional services staff were invited to join hybrid focus groups. A range of fifteen abstract images were offered as a stimulus for discussion. The participants were asked to select images that were representative of their experiences of DEP.   Using images in this way created a 'space of authoring' (Holland et al, 1998) to help them make sense of how they were perceiving themselves. This also helped to 'sharpen' their ability to reflect upon and explain their experiences (Auken, Firvoll and Stewart, 2010) and perceptions of DEP, as well as encourage collaborative knowledge production.

Analysing the participants responses to the photo elicitation activity through a figured world lens enabled us to understand how relationships, practices, people and cultural resources informed their perception of themselves and others as digital users. Factors that contributed to their responses aligned to such aspects as confidence and expertise in the use of digital pedagogies as well as their position and time served in a Higher Education context. Through thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022) patterns in perceptions and experiences were grouped into what we have termed as typologies of digital educators. The typologies have been developed as images with accompanying descriptions. The participants choice of images from the photo-elicitation activities, and their narratives informed the illustrations.

In the conclusion to our presentation, we outline our intention for the typologies to act as artefacts which can be used as a reflexive, agentic tool to support digital users self-evaluation and professional development. Additionally, we reflect on the role of the university in creating the appropriate conditions that provide staff with the capabilities to influence their own professional development and transformation into new figured worlds.

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