

357 What are we backgrounding? Exploring emerging aspects of technology in teacher training programmes

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Research Domains

Digital University and new learning technologies (DU)

Abstract

This paper reports on an ongoing project that explores how critical aspects of technology in teaching are backgrounded in teacher training programmes, meanwhile effective ways of using technology are foregrounded. The paper draws on findings from two participatory design workshops with groups of Danish academics and academic developers.

In the project, the concepts of foreground and background are employed as verbs, where something is actively foregrounded, while other issues are pushed to the background. Whereas the project is a work-in-progress that will be completed by the end of 2023, the results of the workshops already provide valuable insight into a range of micro, meso, and macro level issues affecting higher education staff's use of digital technologies.

Following a brief presentation of the project, we open the floor for a discussion of possible and alternative ways to address the hidden and backgrounded issues of digital technologies in teacher training.

Full paper

Backgrounding [verb]: *to give less attention or emphasis to (something): to place (something) in the background* (merriam-webster.com)

While teacher-training programmes in higher education increasingly integrate aspects of effective usage of digital technology, research from the last 10 to 20 years have prompted calls for institutions and academics to adopt more ecological and critical approaches toward the integration of digital technologies in higher education teaching and learning (Selwyn, 2011, Herrmann et al, 2021). These developments align with a recent call to close the gap between teacher training courses and themes of importance as identified in contemporary research (Kärkkäinen et al., 2023). Neil Selwyn also commented that there has been a tendency in educational literature to address EdTech as an essentially positive project, and a lack of discussion around its actual failures and problems (Selwyn, 2020). In this perspective, there is a tendency for literature on ed tech to foreground the best use of technologies or practicalities, and background more critical discussions.

A risk of this gap and the lack of discussions of current issues in teacher training is that it will reinforce the positive understanding of technologies for the higher education staff, as the teacher training programmes would have been their primary introduction to alternative narratives. However, too much emphasis on the use of technology might also risk taking away space, time and focus from the didactical and pedagogical issues that are already impacted by the instrumental focus on digital technologies in teaching (Stenalt et al, 2023).

Against this background, this paper reports on an ongoing project that explores the extent to which academics and academic developers are aware of aspects backgrounded by attempts to foreground effective ways of using technology. This focus is developed through the following research question: What relationships and tensions are emerging between teacher training programmes, practice and research within the field of higher education digital teaching and learning?

In addressing the overlooked or hidden themes in higher education teacher training and competence development courses, the concepts of foreground and background, as described by Ashwin (2008) has been an inspiration, and in this project used as verbs, where something is actively foregrounded, while other issues are pushed to the background.

Methods

The paper draws on findings from two participatory design workshops with groups of Danish academics and academic developers. As is the case with participatory research, the workshops were used to investigate the realities of the participants and to highlight issues which might be worth integrating in competence development (Spinuzzi, 2005). In brief, participants were distributed in smaller groups of 5 – 6 participants and asked to first identify issues that they found were hidden in the shadows or backgrounded in their teacher training courses. Second, to discuss ways of bringing these issues forward and finally to jointly reflect on the implications of this foregrounding. To support discussions across diverse groups of staff, the process was facilitated by using CoNavigator, a physical tool for interdisciplinary collaboration (c.f. Lindvig et al. 2017, van Lambalgen & de Vos, 2023).

Findings

The project is a work-in-progress that will be completed by the end of 2023. As such, the following results are preliminary. Nevertheless, the results of the workshops already provide valuable insight into a range of micro, meso, and macro level issues affecting higher education staff's use of digital technologies. Issues that were brought up were among others the extra time spent preparing teaching that include digital technologies, that the digital technologies overrule the didactical considerations and that negotiating the didactical contract between students and teacher is disturbed by the many devices in the room, where everyone seems to be alone together. Compared to the current content of teacher training programmes at University of Copenhagen, the emerging themes point to a need to encourage and support the development of a curriculum that covers the main pedagogical themes such as constructive alignment and congruence (Hounsell & Hounsell, 2007), meanwhile also shedding light on implications of digital technologies for teaching and learning. Considering this, it seems prudent to work towards developing or cultivating a room for discussing not only the ideal teaching situations, but also the failures, frustrations and insecurities, which are also part of developing new teaching practices, especially those pushed forward by political and institutional strategies at meso and macro levels of higher education.

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