

Why do doctoral researchers blog? An analysis of genre, audience and purpose (0268)

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In recent years there has been increasing pressure on academics to engage with others in conversation and share research results on ‘social media’, including blogs and micro-blogging sites like Twitter. The old school mantra of ‘Publish or Perish’ is being supplemented with a new-school mantra: ‘Be Visible or Vanish’¹. The assumption underpinning this push is that research practice will be positively transformed by enhanced public exposure and exert greater influence in the ‘real world’ (Mewburn and Thomson, 2013), even if still on the margins of accepted scholarship in terms of promotion and tenure (Ellison & Eatman, 2008)

Shifts in publishing technologies have profound effects on the academic as knowledge producer. Stewart (2015) explored the digital lives of a group of scholars who take part in an ‘emergent techno-cultural scholarly system’ which intersects with, but is distinct from, ‘mainstream’ scholarly networks. She argues, following Weller (2011), that networked economies of scholarship are a ‘post scarcity’ response that challenges conventional publishing models. There has been relatively little attention to the issues of identity and representation that are raised by the emergence of non-mainstream academia. Researchers who engage with new media forms become their own publishers and are engaging in a form of online academic self-fashioning, which is, as yet, poorly understood.

Doctoral students are one group particularly affected by the anxieties around new publishing modalities. This research follows on from our study of academic blogging (Mewburn and Thomson, 2013). Following a similar method as previously, we used a modified snowball sampling technique to explore blogs started by PhD candidates. Similarly to West and Ward (2008) We saw a wider range of activities than those usually discussed in relation to blogging – a rich mix of scholarly identity work, “learning in public”, records of reading, archives of thinking through ideas, diary-like accounts, ‘troubles talk’ (Mewburn, 2011), commentary on higher education and policy, and reflections on the situated work of postgraduate knowledge production.

We use this data to re-consider doctoral subjectivity in relation to non-mainstream academic practice. Research students occupy a ‘liminal space’ (Ward, 2013) of identity formation that is now, for many, partially constructed online. Ward and West (2008) show how PhD blogs can reveal the ‘hidden pedagogy’ of the PhD in action, ‘break’ the boundaries that are usually drawn around these activities and make them visible. In doing so, the process of ‘becoming doctor’, which usually happens in private, becomes a public performance. Our research furthers this line of thought and starts to critically rethink the role of publishing in doctoral candidature in a continually changing higher education landscape.

Traditionally publishing has been a way of legitimating the academic persona. Conventionally the mechanisms of peer review have helped to form academic

¹ The authors would like to credit John W Lamp with coining this phrase

personae within specific (raced, classed and gendered) communities (Clark, 2006). These personae are stabilized through publishing in conventional journals whose social logics are well understood. But new online spaces offer multiple, hybrid modes of publishing that disrupt these normalized modes of academic self-fashioning. Academics can now work much more than the ‘décor’ (Toms & Thelwell, 2005) of the academic homepage, and, through their activity patterns start crafting an identity, or what Pearce et al (2010) call ‘personal branding’.

In this paper we begin to chart this new territory of doctoral text-work/identity work (Kamler and Thomson, 2014) amongst doctoral candidates. We also note, with some ambivalence, that writing in, through and with social media constructs an all day/all night academic. This academic is, perhaps, better prepared for borderless scholarship than those who refuse to engage with social media through “lack of time” or “fear of intellectual property theft”. It also destabilises the single institution as the bases for doctoral formation.. We therefore suggest that blogging can have considerable personal benefits, but may well also contribute to the growth of a ‘shadow’ scholarly community (see Veletsianos, 2015) with both positive and negative implications.

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