Digital scholarship and doctoral identities (0340)

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Doctorates has been argued to demand many things, including the development of skills, mastery of techniques, understanding of threshold concepts, development of networks, engagement with cultures and the development of autonomy, as well as the production of a thesis that meets the requirements of examiners (Bengtsen, 2014).

One element within this complexity is the development of new identities. As Hancock and Walsh (2014) observe, this is a complex and varied process; students pursue a range of academic and professional identities, sometimes simultaneously; Hancock and Walsh describe, for example, a professional scientific identity; the scientific researcher; and the knowledge worker – identities that pay increasing attention to development of the skills and experiences relevant to knowledge-intensive roles across society and the economy.

A developing feature across such identity work is the growing role of digital networks. Weller has proposed (2011) that new technologies have resulted in dramatic changes to contemporary scholarship. Whilst his arguments focus on publication not study, and can be seen as overly deterministic, he notes (p54) how increasing financial pressures combined with widespread use of social networking have changed the way that personal networks develop. Similar incidental effects can be seen around blogging, for example. Although scholars might think of this primarily as a form of writing support and way of enabling open knowledge work, the relational aspects of writing and the positioning of the author relative to their audiences have implications for the development of scholarly identities (Heap & Minocha, 2012). Borgman (2007) similarly notes the ways in which technologies are taken up to support the formation of teams and networks, particularly around the use of data. Outside of academic contexts, developing networked identities remains relevant to employers seeking media-savvy appointees, and to the development of engaged citizens (Greenhow & Gleason, 2014).

Work addressing these processes has primarily been undertaken through case studies, some of which have served to identify and develop theoretical concerns. Bennett & Folley (2014), for example, use personal experiences to discuss the management of parallel academic, personal and professional identities. They point out, for example, the challenges of keeping these separate on social media, so that "tweets written with one audience in mind, such as our work colleagues, were also being read by the other audiences, such as our students or our friends". They also explore the ongoing development of digital doctoral identities in terms of liminality, particularly the sense of being stuck (and associated loss of self-esteem and self-confidence), mimicry (copying the behaviours of successful researchers) and engagement with threshold concepts as markers of progress.

Esposito's analysis of these processes (2013) identifies various motivations to use social and participatory media, such as the growing convergence between building networks and 'celebrity' (associated with 'personal branding'). Her study – involving 14 interviews in one institution – suggested that although researchers used technologies widely, very few saw themselves as 'digital researchers'. They cultivated online personas, seeking recognition, but saw this as additional to, not a replacement for, conventional measures of reputation.

Further theorisation explored how spaces, times and technologies are interwoven to form the "identity-trajectory" of PhD students. This raises questions about how doctoral students co-evolve within the wider academic culture of the research training environments in which they are based (Esposito, Sangrà & Maina, 2013). They draw attention to the way spaces, tools and people are entangled in specific doctoral journeys. Pursuing the concept of learning ecologies, they explore how new technologies arise as invasive 'species' disrupting successful ecologies, the way that ecologies influence the agency of individual learners, and the development of 'personal ecologies' that bring together institutional infrastructures, personal resources and experiences, and networks (Esposito, Sangrà & Maina, 2015).

In this paper, relationships between people, spaces and technologies in the development of doctoral identities will be explored in relation to data generated by four doctoral students at a UK institution. The students undertook longitudinal multimodal journaling, and were interviewed 3-4 times each about their use of technologies, as part of a wider project on digital literacies (Gourlay & Oliver, 2013). These revealed, for example, how the students managed multiple email and social network accounts in order to develop and manage parallel digital identities, and the ways in which these developed over time.

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