

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

0100

R5 | Conwy 2

Chaired by Louise Drumm

Fri 13 Dec 2019

09:00 - 09:30

Doctoral students, social media and learning considered through the lens of identity formation

Liz Bennett¹, Sue Folley¹

¹*University of Huddersfield, Manchester, United Kingdom*

Research Domain: The Digital University and new learning technologies (DU)

Abstract: The online lives of doctoral students is an under researched topic and graduate educators may be concerned that they are unaware of best way to support and advise their students on the adoption of these relatively new tools and practices. This paper draws on 24 responses to an online questionnaire which aimed to understand the choices that doctoral students make regarding their online identities. The paper explores the choices that students make about going online, what informs these choices and how their online identities and relationships support their learning. The paper employs theoretical concepts of mimicry, stuckness and oscillation (Kiley 2009) to understand the potential of these spaces to support doctoral students in their identity formation (Thomson and Kamler 2014).

Kiley, M. (2009). Identifying threshold concepts and proposing strategies to support doctoral candidates. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 46(3), 293-304. doi:10.1080/14703290903069001

Thomson, P., & Kamler, B. (2014). *Helping Doctoral Students Write Pedagogies for Supervision* (2nd ed.). Abingdon: Routledge.

Paper:

Over the last decade there has been a phenomenal growth in the numbers of bloggers, online networks and twitter groups offering doctoral candidates advice on their PhD. The growth of online platforms for PhD advice and support shows no signs of diminishing. Indeed the availability of advice online is extensive and many supervisors and Directors of Graduate education may be unaware of how to advise and guide doctoral students in this emerging medium.

Doctoral study is characterised by feelings of isolation, feelings of bewilderment, stuck-ness and confusion (Barry et al 2018; Carter et al. 2013; Kiley 2009). At the same time doctoral students report being increasingly pressurised by the challenges of combining working and studying and frequently

report low satisfaction and isolation during their studies (Schmidt et al. 2018; Wisker and Robinson 2018) yet doctoral students are also less likely to access mental health services (Waight and Giordano 2018). This is all the more worrying in that the adoption of social media is often associated with concerns about increased risk to one's mental health (Mishna et al. 2018), and indeed doctoral student, who were early adopters of social media, reported that they experienced negative feeling belittled when engaging with PhD related Twitter forum (Bennett and Folley 2014).

This study aimed to better understand how doctoral students experience being online as part of their doctoral studies. We focussed on the way that they engaged with Twitter, the microblogging platform and on writing and reading blogs. Our study set out to answer three questions:

- What choices do doctoral students' make about whether to use social media whilst studying, and what are their reasons for making these choices?
- In what ways do social media help doctoral students' learning?
- What advice would you give to other doctoral students regarding their use of social media?

Theoretical framing

The doctoral journey is one that is often understood as an identity transformation process whereby, over the course of study, the student moves into a transformed state as they become a more confident researcher. This has been described as a socialisation process that involves enculturation (Parry 2007) and acceptance into the 'academic tribe' of one's discipline (Becher and Trowler 2001). It involves recognising the rules which are both covert and hidden (Parry 2007). As Carter et al. note "This doctoral game is about negotiating entry to a culture; acceptance there entails identity shifts" (2013 p.339).

Thomson and Kamler use the notion of identity work to understand struggles that doctoral students have in relation to their developing identity as scholars and how these are performed through their writing. In this paper we apply the notion of identity work to the development and promotion of a doctoral student's online engagement and employ notions of mimicry, oscillation and stuckness to analyse the data from the study (Kiley 2009).

Methods

We used an online questionnaire to gather data about doctoral students, and those who had been doctoral students within the last 2 years which was distributed via the PGR mailing list in the school of education and distributing the link to the questionnaire via Twitter using relevant hash tags #phdchat, #phdforum, #phdlife. We received 24 responses. We asked mostly open ended questions about their use, motivations and value that they found in using Twitter and by reading and or writing blogs.

Findings

We identify that doctoral students make informed and critical choices in which platforms they engage with and the degree of activity that they feel conformable with. We note that with that Twitter is the most dominant tool for forming and maintaining online communities and few of our sample of doctoral students were engaged in writing their own blog although many were active in reading blogs that are aimed at doctoral students particularly thesiswhisperer (<https://thesiswhisperer.com/>) and

patter blog (<https://patthomson.net/>).

We illustrate, with use of quotes from our participants, how these online platforms provide a medium through which students can enact their developing scholarly identity and in particular help them to develop through mimicry of being around other scholars more expert in their field, to reduce or overcome the stuckness often experienced during doctoral study and to develop their identity through the process of oscillation.

For many of our participants, their doctoral studies were significantly enhanced by their engagement in online communities as they provided a place for scholarly identity work that helped to overcome some of the isolation associated with doctoral studies.

We identify a number of recommendations for doctoral students, doctoral supervisors and Directors of Graduate Education which flow from our findings.

References

Barry, K. M., Woods, M., Warnecke, E., Stirling, C., & Martin, A. (2018). Psychological health of doctoral candidates, study-related challenges and perceived performance. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 37(3), 468-483. doi:10.1080/07294360.2018.1425979

Becher, T., & Trowler, P. (2001). *Academic tribes and territories: Intellectual enquiry and the cultures of disciplines* (2nd ed.). Buckingham: Open University Press/SRHE.

Bennett, L., & Folley, S. (2014). A tale of two doctoral students: social media tools and hybridised identities. *Research in Learning Technology*, 22(0). doi:10.3402/rlt.v22.23791

Carter, S., Blumenstein, M., & Cook, C. (2013). Different for women? The challenges of doctoral studies. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 18(4), 339-351. doi:10.1080/13562517.2012.719159

Kiley, M. (2009). Identifying threshold concepts and proposing strategies to support doctoral candidates. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 46(3), 293-304. doi:10.1080/14703290903069001

Lupton, D., Mewburn, I., & Thomson, P. (2017). *The Digital Academic : Critical Perspectives on Digital Technologies in Higher Education*. Milton, UNITED KINGDOM: Routledge.

Mishna, F., Regehr, C., Lacombe-Duncan, A., Daciuk, J., Fearing, G., & Van Wert, M. (2018). Social media, cyber-aggression and student mental health on a university campus. *Journal of mental health (Abingdon, England)*, 27(3), 222-229. doi:10.1080/09638237.2018.1437607

Parry, S. (2007). *Disciplines and doctorates Higher education dynamics*, Dordrecht: Springer. Dordrecht: Springer.

Schmidt, M., Hansson, E., Fakulteten för, h., Fakulteten för, l., Höskolan, K., Forskningsplattformen för Hälsa i, s., . . . Avdelningen för sjuksköterskeutbildningarna och integrerad, h. (2018). Doctoral students' well-being: a literature review. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-being*, 13(1), 1508171. doi:10.1080/17482631.2018.1508171

Thomson, P., & Kamler, B. (2014). *Helping Doctoral Students Write Pedagogies for Supervision* (2nd

ed.). Abingdon: Routledge.

Waight, E., & Giordano, A. (2018). Doctoral students' access to non-academic support for mental health. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 40(4), 390-412. doi:10.1080/1360080X.2018.1478613

Wisker, G., & Robinson, G. (2018). In sickness and in health, and a 'duty of care': phd student health, stress and wellbeing issues and supervisory experiences. In E. Bitzer (Ed.), *Spaces, journeys and new horizons for postgraduate supervision*. Stellenbosch South Africa.