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Navigating the Terrain:

Emerging Frontiers in Learning Spaces, Pedagogies, and Technologies

The Postdigital Panorama: Conceptualising Higher Education Teachers' Intermingled Identities in Australasia

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University teachers are in the midst of a messy and entangled postdigital era. They face a constant stream of data and increasingly visible teaching as a consequence of digital media and AI spaces. This prompts the need for identity work to reconsider the personal, professional and societal meanings of the role of teachers in a world where people and machines are becoming further interwoven. Narrowing it down to social media spaces that encompass context collapse, it is becoming increasingly difficult to draw a line between personal and professional facets of life. Higher education teachers, who contribute to social media, construct fluid, greatly changeable and intermingled identities. The current study aims to conceptualise the practices and roles that may guide these emerging identities using a theoretical vignette as a tool. The presented case can initiate the discussions on who we are and who we are becoming in the current realities and prompt questions about learning and teaching in the networked society.

Keywords: intermingled identities, university teachers, postdigital, digital media spaces, conceptual paper, vignette.

Introduction

In the postdigital age technologies are deeply woven into everyday social practices. At the same time, people are becoming critically aware of the increased influence of digital technologies on cognition, actions, and perceptions (Striano, 2019). Due to the interconnections of people and machines, individuals are bombarded with vast amounts of information and question the personal, professional, and societal meanings of this world and being a teacher in it. Although academics have multiple facets of their professional identities and being an expert in a particular field is often more important than being an educator (McCune, 2021), this paper endeavours to pin it down only to their teaching-focused identities.

In higher education, teachers experience cognitive overload as they are challenged by the expectations to perform more publicly and openly in digital media environments (Markauskaite et al., 2023). This may suggest that the current society is profoundly networked and people almost 'live' in the digital spaces. In addition, considering Australasia as a specific example, the adoption of digital and social media is coupled with anxieties about securing 'brick-and-mortar walls' of a university classroom (Willems et al., 2018). In view of this, digital technologies may intensify lecturers' professional insecurities and vulnerabilities and more importantly, prompt their identity work to re-think who they are and who they are becoming in the postdigital complex landscape.

Intermingled Identities

Digital media environments and, particularly social media platforms, are openly accessible domains for creative expression and collaboration (Willems et al., 2018). In higher education, the omnipresence of such spaces can make teachers' identities and the processes of teaching and learning more permeable and fragmented (Gravett, 2024). Meanwhile, the skills of creating digital resources in a variety of contexts are becoming important for teaching and learning in today's realities. In contrast, social media environments are often run by tricky corporate rules and stimulate massive data generation; they are not designed for teaching and learning per se. Teachers' authorities are often confronted with and questioned by these digital and networked spaces. Identity can be imagined as an inner soul, which is 'dragged' into a public terrain (Lemke, 2008); this online terrain becomes more and more openly available and ungraspable. University teachers, eager to contribute to

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a wider circulation of knowledge, are forced to construct and adopt new roles. Therefore, the practice of engaging in digital media spaces requires an identity shift.

People's identities are informed by their social positions and roles within specific contexts (Trautwein, 2018). However, the digital and networked spaces have context collapse. This phenomenon points out the difficulty and discomfort to separate the different elements of personal and professional lives (Dennen, 2021). In other words, the line between personal and professional identities is considerably blurred. For instance, the decision of higher education teachers to actively contribute to social media platforms can involve the revelation that various textual and visual media content may be simultaneously addressed to their students, to other educators and to the general public. Various social roles are interwoven, and personal and professional sides of teachers' identities are intermingled. These identities are complex, multifaceted, dynamic and fluid. They are co-constructed in interactions with different, in some cases unknown, audiences. It can be emphasised that university teachers, who create resources for social media platforms, are becoming open, public personas.

From the outlined perspective, it can be suggested that university teachers can still be guided by the core principles and beliefs in their professional practice; however, with global reach, they may encounter different perspectives, views, and knowledge. University teachers are pushed to develop new expertise, contribute it to the wider circulation and blend it with the knowledge of others, which may lead to mutual adaptation to the postdigital complex realities (Markauskaite et al., 2023). Therefore, it is important to inquire about the university teachers' fluid and adaptable identities in digital media spaces and specifically, about the practices and roles that require the construction of these identities.

The following research question originated from the arguments above:

How higher education teachers conceptualise their intermingled identities and their represented roles and practices in the postdigital era?

The potential significance of online engagement may be illuminated and provide thoughts for reflection and initial dialogue into identity changes and how it might become "springboards for development" (Konnerup et al, 2019, p. 112) in designing and enhancing learning and teaching in the networked society.

As an illustration of higher education teachers' identity work in the postdigital 'panorama', the current study presents the practice of creation of educational videos on YouTube.

The Vignette - Amy

This paper endeavours to conceptualise emerging intermingled identities of university teachers by providing a hypothetical vignette, which reimagines real-life examples. This methodology draws on a User Experience (UX) approach and has been used by others (Brown & MacCallum, 2022) as a useful means to contextualise and support the discussion of a research question. We created a persona, a fictional character inspired by literature (Tondeur et al., 2023; Balkin & Sonnevend, 2016), and built one scenario around this persona to imagine the context.

Amy is a lecturer at University G in New Zealand. Her story of navigating the postdigital educational reality is presented in Figure 1.

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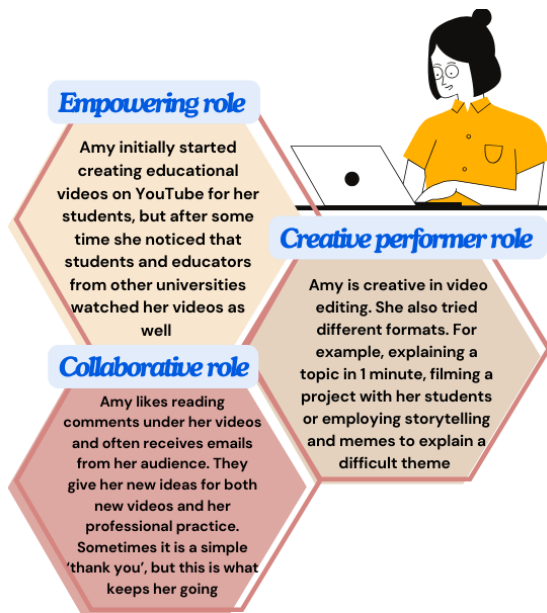


Figure 1. The case of Amy. The figure is created in Canva under a free subscription.

At the level of 'university teacher as an individual on a social media platform', engagement is increasingly influenced by the nature of networking sites. They are in most cases designed for continuous consumption (Selwyn, 2024) and it is emphasised that anyone can be a creator (Srnicek, 2017). Shifting away from individualised consumption practices, digital media spaces can also fuel meaningful practices. For instance, the agential intention to create more open resources to empower students not only in the private space of face-to-face classroom but in the boundless imagined space with unspecified audience (Tondeur et al., 2023). This is an empowering role.

At the level of 'teacher at higher education institutions', the neoliberal culture pushes competitiveness, curious mindset, and creativity in finding unique ideas (Prestridge, 2019). University lecturers are expected to do more than merely broadcast and deliver lectures; furthermore, they need to become good rhetoricians and entertainers (Balkin & Sonnevend, 2016). The creation of educational videos may be seen as a way to be more employable (Willems et al., 2018) and certainly, master digital performance. This is a creative performer role.

At the level of 'university teacher in networked society', the role of collaboration and collective decision-making is increasing. Although higher education teachers should care for themselves as individuals in the postdigital reality, it is also believed that they strive for support and solidarity, the ability to share achievements and vulnerabilities (Foreman-Brown et al., 2023). The emergence of mutual care in networks might help to enact collective adaptation and change (Selwyn, 2024). This is a collaborative role.

Discussion and Conclusion

Zooming in on social media environments in the postdigital 'panorama', it can be argued that digital spaces enable and facilitate public ecologies in which higher education teachers may think and act. By making their practice open to different people, university teachers develop new expertise and master digital tools to share what they are passionate about more globally, which affects others and teachers themselves in return. The side effect is context collapse blurring the boundaries of personal and professional facets of life. Higher education teachers' identities become more dynamic, and they require a 'gracious' balance between the different facets of their identities. It can be presumed that these identities might be conceptualised as networked identities. According to Mosera & Ashforth (2021), networked identities are more self-constructed and fluid. They are "crafted by the individual for the individual" (Mosera & Ashforth, 2021, p. 4) and more voluntarily based.

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Networked identities are profoundly adaptable to different contexts and reflect the changes in society, which is more networked and digitally sustained.

Whilst Amy's vignette is based on the literature debates (Tondeur et al., 2023; Balkin & Sonnevend, 2016) and it outlines a somewhat ideal image of a teacher, who is passionate about technology and is highly involved in digital media spaces, it is also inspired by the examples of genuine university teachers on social media. This paper cautiously invites higher education teachers to initiate dialogue and discuss whether intermingled (networked) identities, and their represented practices and roles, are becoming a norm in the postdigital education? How does it influence and if at all, enhance teaching and learning in higher education? How do universities react and accept teachers' content creation on social media platforms? Are university teachers ready to empower more globally, and 'creatively entertain'? If so, is mutual care and collaboration a key to adapt in the postdigital future? Further data-based examination is needed to discover the answers to these questions.

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