

e-teaching: a pedagogy of uncertainty and promise

Investigating the uncertain space between theory and practice of online education is the subject of the author's doctoral research. Explorations of the social relations of virtual learning are enabled through a community approach to sharing scholarship and practice. At a UK university, staff are repositioned as students on the institutional VLE. Interaction through wikis, journals and forums, with assessment by eportfolio, recreates the challenges of teaching online which are often unanticipated without 'insider' knowledge. The research suggests adopting a 'pedagogy of uncertainty' as a valuable approach to the design and delivery of online education, in particular with regard to the invisible 'otherness' of virtual identity. As early rhetorical promises of elearning are being challenged, feedback suggests experiential approaches to teacher education and professional development are worthy of investment and the craft of e-teaching warrants greater attention.

Keywords: e-teaching, teacher education, CPD, research, digital education, VLE

Introduction

There is scant evidence of the transformative promise of e-learning. The lecture and seminar remain dominant modes of transmission and virtual learning environments (VLE) are largely content repositories (Selwyn 2007, Heirdsfield et al 2011). Wider relationships between technology, education and social change are rarely discussed (Freisen 2009, Saljo 2009 Selwyn 2007 2014). Insufficient attention has been paid to reinventing the lecture for virtual delivery or how online communication can sustain educational discourse and debate. Lack of convergence between the rhetorical promise and present-day realities of elearning has been highlighted (Laurillard 20***, Reeves et al*****) yet calls for increased technology enhanced learning and flexible pedagogies continue (Ryan and Tilbury 2013 Willets *****). Successful virtual learning is dependent on digitally literate staff who can motivate, enthuse and retain students. This paper suggests in order to fulfil the promise of digital education, a better understanding of the relationship between staff who teach and support learning and their VLE is required. The literature of digital education privileges learning technology and the student experience. The author of this paper, a senior lecturer in educational development at a UK university, chose an action research doctorate to further investigate the craft of e-teaching. This paper describes the background and development of the course and offers some emerging ideas and concepts from the research data.

e-learning; success or failure?

At the turn of the century, VLE were embedded into university networks amid promises of increased efficiency, self-directed learning and new global markets (NCIHE 1997). Functionality took precedence over essential shifts in pedagogies often leading to replication of existing practice (Lisewski 2004, Bennett and Lockyer 2004, Bell and Bell 2005). Critical perspectives of elearning (Clegg et al 2003, Conole 2004, Freisen 2008, Saljo 2009) mix with pragmatic calls for increased attention to theory and design (Beetham and Sharpe 2013, Reeves, McKenney and Herrington, 2011, Bennett and Oliver 2011, Gunn and Steele 2012). Claims over-reliance on evaluations and case study approaches to evaluating learning technologies have weakened reliable research Data leading to depressing views '...it is extremely difficult to trace the impact of educational research to anything that really matters.' (Reeves et al 2012:57) and 'the promise of virtual learning in the 1990s has come to nothing and elearning within the university has failed'. (Feenburg 2011:2). The early promise of elearning was repeated with open education (OER, MOOC), social media and mobile learning (Anderson 2007, JISC 2009, Conole 2010) but media enthusiasm contrasted with reports of low appetite for change (Watling(a) 2009, Heirdsfield et al 2011, Sheward and Hamilton 2012) alongside deficits of time, support and appropriate resources (Walker et al, 2012). The perceived challenges of elearning today (Johnson et al 2014) are not dissimilar from barriers identified a decade earlier (Bennett and Lockyer 2004).

e-teaching; initiatives, positives and challenges

Answering the question 'to what extent can staff be aided in managing the wide array of technologies and resources, and more importantly to develop approaches to teaching to utilise these effectively?' (Gordon 2014:9) is essential to achieving digital ambitions. Internal analysis of VLE usage suggested staff at the author's institution remained digitally shy. Participation in a Change Academy programme, Embedding OER Practice (Watling(b) 2012) highlighted a range of digital confidence and competencies among staff and reinforced the

value of dedicated time for sharing virtual practice. A short online course, Teaching and Learning in a Digital Age (TELEDA) was developed to fill the space created by the project's conclusion. This aimed to legitimate dedicated time for digital practice. The course relocated staff as students on an institutional VLE and engaged them in an activity-based curriculum including critical reflective journaling and assessment by eportfolio. The course (30 M level credits) was added to the university's portfolio of teacher education programmes in 2012, piloted 2012/13 and ran again in 2013/14. Delivered and assessed entirely through the institutional VLE (Blackboard), it introduced the principles of online design and delivery with emphasis on open educational resources (OER). Forums and wikis were used for communication and collaboration alongside the journal tool to evidence critical reflection on VLE for an assessed eportfolio. Enrolling staff as students offered an authentic student view of Blackboard as well as opportunities to consider application of this experience to individual practice. Following its success, a second course introducing social media and e-resource development was approved and piloted in 2014. In 2014/15 both courses will be validated as a PG Cert in Digital Education.

The action research cycles provide useful opportunities for examining the complex practice changes required for adopting online teaching practice (Kolb 1984, McNiff 2013). Supporting the shift from face-to-face to faceless delivery is challenging and unlikely to reach everyone, in particular the digitally shy, but experience with Embedding OER Practice showed how participation created local 'champions' and the TELEDA experience is having a similar effect for example "...consequently I volunteered to become Digital Champion for Humanities and will undertake additional Blackboard training to support the role." (Author's research data 2014). TELEDA also highlights resistance and risks reinforcing existing prejudice for example "I can see why students don't really like it [Blackboard] as compared to other sites...it is very clunky and dry" and "I'm also finding the navigation in Blackboard unfriendly...[I am] more used to being able to get around quickly and easily" (Author's research data 2014). Connecting people with shared dislikes as well as enthusiasms provides valuable spaces to surface and explore resistance. One colleague reported surprise at feelings of defensiveness when Blackboard was critiqued as they realised "Blackboard is not the problem, there is nothing wrong with Blackboard, being an online tutor is just very different...." (Author's research data 2014). TELEDA's emphasis on shared practice and inquiry mirrors an educational community engaged "in purposeful critical discourse and reflection to construct personal meaning and confirm mutual understanding" (Garrison 2011: 6). Participants are supported to look beyond perceived deficits in functionality and reflect meaningfully on how VLEs enable interactive learning resources and opportunities instead.

Having 'insider' knowledge highlights the advantages of 'any-time any-place' education while reinforcing the uncertain nature of virtual space where participants are only known through the information they choose to share and identity construction limited by text-only communication which can all too easily be misunderstood. The potential for isolation can be countered by participant use of social media tools and synchronous video but not everyone is comfortable with these alternatives.

I haven't yet recovered from the tiny but upsetting Facebook Incident in which I briefly defied the Group Leader....I'm sure I am at least as grey and anonymous to them as most of them are to me and they probably don't even remember my brave stance against the hegemony of Facebook." (Author's research data 2014)

The experiential nature of TELEDA remains a key strength. Relocating staff as students opens up viewpoints which are instrumental in changing attitudes towards teaching online. "I think adopting the role of student is a useful experience as it reminds me of the pressures involved in studentship and enables greater empathy to students and their experiences" and "...I felt very frustrated ...I can now empathise with students who complain of technological problems" (Author's research data 2014). Collaborative group work offered opportunities for sharing practice in supportive collegial environments, while many participants found their reflective journal an effective tool for consolidating learning; "I like keeping a reflective journal. If my small module runs after Christmas I am considering doing something like this or maybe opening a discussion board as another opportunity to get some direct student input." (Author's research data 2014) High levels of peer interaction throughout the learning blocks supports deeper approaches to managing the shift to e-teaching.

The course is over and this is my last entry :(after overcoming initial challenges and frustrations I have enjoyed the module and feel my knowledge and confidence has increased during the course. I feel the experiential learning process has been beneficial and I am looking forward to putting what I have learnt into practice next academic year when teaching begins. (Author's research data 2014)

Emerging insights and concepts

The changing and developing medium of VLE requires continual reflection on practice. Social media, open

education, app developments and mobile learning all constitute learning curves which are essential components of e-teaching. The author's action research doctorate requires specific evaluative practices but these processes are also integral to effective e-teaching experiences. The concepts emerging from this research evolved from shared TELEDA experiences which stress the importance of a scholarly approach to e-teaching; one which makes use of the published evidence base alongside observation, reflection-on-action and sharing practice. This research would not be possible without collaboration with colleagues from the author's team and on the courses.

Digital literacies, those "...capabilities which fit someone for living, learning and working in a digital society" (JISC 2014) are personal and reflect individual ways of working. There is no one-size-fits-all model and no single curriculum for ensuring their development. The diversity of ways people use computers and access the internet is one of many 'elements of the unknown' e-teachers have to incorporate into their design and delivery. Myths of digital competence arise through assuming a narrow range of access criteria and use. Those who drive technology adoption are rarely those who use it on a day-to-day basis for teaching. Awareness of digital divides and exclusions, the uncertainties of virtual identity and an ability to manage the unknown and invisible are essential criteria for e-teaching success.

Lack of consensus on what to call e-teachers may be symptomatic of a wider absence of status. Lecturers are rarely referred to as e-lecturers. Instead the choice includes tutor, trainer, instructor, facilitator, moderator. As the term e-learning has been widely accepted so the description e-teaching offers an essential but neglected balance. The difference is not pedantic. The craft of e-teaching demands a different approach; one where the lecturer has to facilitate learning opportunities without clues from personal communication or body language to facilitate pace and timing. The unknown and the uncertain are best discovered and managed within collegial and supportive environments, generated through teacher education and development, rather than the first experience of teaching online with invisible students. Effective virtual learning requires interactive rather than passive engagement. An ABC (Activity Based Community) model of e-teaching, based on shared practice and inquiry, is an essential mechanism for confronting the potential loneliness and demands of e-learning. VLE generate challenging ambitions but they also contain the promise of widening educational opportunities and enhancing personal and professional development. To achieve these ambitions, time, reward and recognition for pursuing and completing an apprenticeship to the craft of e-teaching are essential.

Conclusion

Calls for shifting to distance, blended and flexible designs and delivery of higher education opportunities are increasing. Less explicit but equally necessary are expectations for academics to maintain online profiles and manage with confidence a mass of digital knowledge and information. Professional networking platforms, social bookmarking tools, repositories of OER, describing a MOOC and being present on Twitter, as well as demonstrating e-teaching competence, all require digitally literate staff who can manage the 'Virtual' as well as the 'Real' in their lives. The gap between the rhetoric and practice of elearning is being recognised but no whole institution solutions have yet been found. This paper suggests an institutional shift in focus from e-learning to e-teaching, and recognising the demands and rewards of digital education from the perspective of staff who teach and support learning, is worth the investment of time and resources. Incorporating an 'insider' approach to teacher education, surfacing the challenges of working with the uncertain and unknown and balancing these alongside the virtual freedom from traditional barriers of time and distance, appears an effective preparation for shifting from traditional face-to-face to online practice. Adopting a 'pedagogy of uncertainty and promise' reflects the challenge and benefits of e-teaching. It offers a pragmatic but rewarding approach to teacher education and professional development, one which is increasingly relevant for a digital present and futures.

References

- Anderson, P. (2007). *What is Web 2.0? Ideas, technologies and implications for education*. JISC
<http://www.jisc.ac.uk/media/documents/techwatch/tsw0701b>.
- Beetham, H., Sharpe, R. (2013). *Rethinking Pedagogy for a Digital Age: Designing and Delivering E-Learning*. Second Edition. Routledge.
- Bell, M., Bell, W. (2005). It's installed... now get on with it! Looking beyond the software to the cultural change. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 36(4), 643–656. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-8535.2005.00541.x
- Bennett, S. Lockyer, L. (2004). Becoming an Online Teacher: Adapting to a Changed Environment for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education. *Educational Media International*, 41(3), 231-248. DOI: 10.1080/09523980410001680842

- Bennett, S., Oliver, M. (2011). Talking back to theory: the missed opportunities in learning technology research. *Research in Learning Technology*, 19(3), 179–189. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21567069.2011.624997>
- Clegg, S., Hudson, A., Steel, J (2003). The Emperor's New Clothes: Globalisation and e-learning in Higher Education. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 24(1),39-53. DOI: 10.1080/01425690301914
- Conole, G. (2004). E-Learning: The Hype and the Reality. *Journal of Interactive Media in Education*, 11 <http://www-jime.open.ac.uk/2004/12/>
- Garrison, R. (2011). *E-Learning in the 21st Century: A Framework for Research and Practice*. Second Edition. Routledge.
- Heirdsfield, A., Walker, S., Tambyah, M., & Beutel, D. (2011). Blackboard As An Online Learning Environment: What Do Teacher Education Students And Staff Think? *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 36(7). <http://dx.doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2011v36n7.4>
- Feenberg, A. (2011). *Agency and Citizenship in a Technological Society*. Presentation to the IT University of Copenhagen. <http://www.sfu.ca/~andrewf/copen5-1.pdf>
- Freisen, N. (2008). Critical Theory: Ideology Critique and the Myths of E-Learning. *Ubiquity* 2008 June(2) DOI:10.1145/1386858.1386860
- Feenberg, A. and Friesen, N. (2011). *(Re)Inventing the Internet: Critical Case Studies*. Sense Publishers.
- JISC (2009). *Higher Education in a Web 2.0 World*. JISC. <http://www.jisc.ac.uk/media/documents/publications/heweb20rptv1.pdf>
- Johnson, L., Adams Becker, S., Estrada, V., Freeman, A. (2014). *NMC Horizon Report: 2014 Higher Education Edition*. Austin, Texas: the new Media Consortium. <http://cdn.nmc.org/media/2014-nmc-horizon-report-he-EN-SC.pdf>
- Kolb, D. (1984). *Experiential learning: experience as the source of learning and development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Lisewski, B. (2004). Implementing a learning technology strategy: top–down strategy meets bottom–up culture. *Research in Learning Technology*, 12(2), 175-188. DOI: 10.1080/0968776042000216228
- Gordon, N. (2014). *Flexible Pedagogies. Technology Enhanced Learning*. York: HEA.
- Gunn, C. Steele, C. (2012) Linking theory to practice in learning technology research. *Research in Learning Technology*, 20: 16148 – 10.3402/rlt.v20i0.16148
- McNiff, J. (2013). *Action Research: Principles and Practice*. Third Edition. Routledge
- NCIHE (1997) *Higher education in the learning society. Report of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education: 'The Dearing Report'*. Norwich: HMSO
- Reeves, T., McKenney, S., Herrington, J. (2011). Publishing and perishing: The critical importance of educational design research. *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*, 27(1), 55-65. <http://ascilite.org.au/ajet/ajet27/reeves.html>
- Ryan, A., & Tilbury, D. (2013). *Flexible Pedagogies, new pedagogical ideas*. York: HEA. http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/flexiblelearning/Flexiblepedagogies/new_ped_ideas/mpi_report.pdf
- Säljö, R. (2010). Digital tools and challenges to institutional traditions of learning: technologies, social memory and the performative nature of learning. *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, 26: 53–64. DOI: 10.1111/j.1365-2729.2009.00341.x
- Salmon, G. (2005). Flying not flapping: a strategic framework for e-learning and pedagogical innovation in higher education institutions. *Research in Learning Technology*, 13(3). DOI: 10.1080/09687760500376439
- Salmon, G. and Angood, R. (2013). Sleeping with the enemy. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 44: 916–925. DOI: 10.1111/bjet.12097
- Selwyn, N. (2007), The use of computer technology in university teaching and learning: a critical perspective. *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, 23: 83–94. DOI: 10.1111/j.1365-2729.2006.00204.x
- Selwyn, N. (2014) *Distrusting Educational Technology*. Routledge.
- Sheward, L. & Hamilton, L. (2012). Designing and implementing an online PG Cert TLHE. *Educational Development*, 13 (1), 3-6. http://www.seda.ac.uk/resources/files/publications_128_Ed%20Devs%2013.1%20v4%20FINAL.pdf
- Walker, R., Voce, J., Ahmed, J. (2012) 2012 Survey of Technology Enhanced Learning for higher education in the UK. Oxford: UCISA.
- Watling, S. (2009). Technology-Enhanced Learning: A New Digital Divide? In Bell, L., Stevenson, H. and Neary, M. (eds) *The Future of Higher Education: Policy, Pedagogy and the Student Experience*. London: Continuum.
- Watling, S. (2012). *Embedding OER Practice: Final Report*. Higher Education Academy. http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/projects/detail/oer/OER_HEIC1_Lincoln