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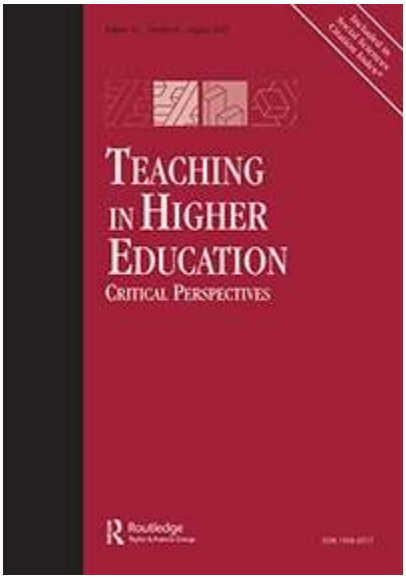

Behind the Digital Curtain: Academic identities, liminalities and labour market adaptations the "Uber-isation" of HE

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Behind the Digital Curtain: a study of academic identities, liminalities and labour market adaptations for the "*Uber-isation*" of HE

This paper explores sensemaking narratives from teaching academics undertaking identity work in the context of a rapidly expanding digital education sphere. It considers the implications for emotional labour and status of digitised higher education teaching academics from the imposition of a rejuvenated New Public Management. We discuss possible tainting from fractured and short-term contractual arrangements alongside growth in managerialism, metrics and accountability.

This study combines photographic ethnography and interviews to gain insight into uncertainties, anxieties, identity legitimations and participant responses to imposed changes within digitally evolving workspaces. The paper explores teaching cultures within two higher education institutions, on different points of a digital continuum, finding discourses of alienation, liminality and validation. Resultant 'sticky' or resistant behaviours in rapid adaptations to digital teaching life were heard as we aimed to understand what it means to teach in a digitised, neoliberal context.

Keywords: academic identity; digital; HE management.

Introduction

Higher Education teaching is fast approaching and may already be at the crossroads of a profound series of change intersections. Government agencies in many countries have implemented market logics to the sector with the stated purpose of attaining value for money. Benefits of tertiary education are increasingly being reframed as a personal rather than public good, leading to a shift of direct costs to the rising numbers of students as individuals, (Muller, 2018,74).

In response, universities have now sought to position themselves in competitive markets, via a variety of selling points including employability, or cost-effective quality provision. These economic strategies have accompanied seemingly fortuitous recent expansions in online delivery options facilitated through technological enhancements.

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New media platforms and marketized ideas for delivering pedagogy and assessments have resulted in a proliferation of digital equivalence 'solutions' to traditional face-to-face or blended teaching approaches.

Taking a comparative approach between two HE universities (labelled here as UNI A and UNI B) we aim to help understand how these issues impact practices for teaching staff in different digital contexts. Different marketplaces have resulted in different digital strategies. In university A, digital options for HE studies are increasing within a competitive, mass-market, neoliberalised environment. They are leveraging technological innovations hard to maximise student numbers and promote competitive fee structures.

In university B, the teaching context, offers digitisation as an innovative complement to traditional campus interactions. For UNI B, the digital remit is principally to keep congruence with market trends as a now-expected component of excellence in provision.

In both institutions, digitised teaching is a stated part of holistic 'student experience' strategy, which aims to ensure currency, increase student numbers and facilitate retention. These moves to digitisation have been described as impacting who would learn, how and what (Zuboff, 2015:77), as competitive sector providers undertake mimetic behaviour. The study therefore focusses on digital teaching in these two institutions: a university leading with face-to-face teaching, supported by integrated digital facilities and a distance learning provider offering blended approaches.

However, management motivations behind digitisation vary between institutions. Normative technological solutions present as model enhancements, which can help to widen participation and increase availability of teaching materials and student support. Implementation has moved rapidly over twenty years from individual academic interest to optimised applications that maximise benefits available. Stated rationalities in maximising student numbers and resources, as well as models for managing staff in economic ways, have become a feature of technological enhancement and digital equivalence in teaching. The digital teaching sphere has created its own logics and value system, recalling Weber's perspectives on task specialisation and regulatory bureaucracy (see e.g. Weber, 2009 [1946]:216). Turner (2009 xxx) considers that Weber's rational capital approach has evolved into our "network society", which

Commented [AM1]: Does that belong to the first sentence for flow?
Rather "management motivations behind digitisation vary in HE… or according to institution?

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provides useful insight. A digital life offers both predictability that might enhance social freedom, but also embodies elements of Parson's iconic translation of Weber's "iron cage" (Gehäuse) as a future of "mechanised petrification" (Weber, 2001 [1930] :124)

In the UK, teaching strategies explicitly accompany a secondary purpose via neoliberalised governmental frameworks which assess the value and purpose of universities as social institutions. These drives to metricisation have been analysed as a form of centralised control (Muller, 2018:71-4), and in order to achieve "value" governments institute metrics. In his book, Muller posits that HEIs are, "evaluated largely on the extent to which various procedures are followed…", with the twofold result that teaching staff are forced to devote more time to paperwork, and numbers of administrators have "mushroomed". The enactment of these policies intersecting with adaptations to digital workspaces and labour transformations, continually shape academics' bond with their University in material, economic and political ways. In the UK, US and Australia histories of tenure are being unwound resulting in a proliferation of fixed-term or hourly-paid contracts. Narratives of a multi-tiered academic 'marketplace' are sprouting, alongside untenable workloads and a higher education gig economy, the suggested uber-isation of HE.

However, the amplification of material aspects of precarity obscures questions about the accompanying, immaterial considerations of digital teaching evolution. The seeming inevitability of digital equivalence as part of teaching in knowledge economies sidesteps contestations of whether patterns of digital labour and the construction of such roles are appropriate. There may be a variety of practical and emotional implications for this sort of role. These include positive frames such as international reach, and spatial and temporal flexibility, which are often normatively promoted by universities. More contestable implications could be loneliness, (Grant et al, 2013) self (or externally imposed) ever-presence online, and loss of institutional-belonging acts such as via water-cooler conversations. Negative associations include loss of communities of practice and personal development opportunities.

The rapid growth of digital labour, and its implications for normative models of work (see Huws, Spencer and Syrdal, 2018:114) mean that possible impacts on individuals are only recently being studied. Developments to the neoliberalised academy have substantially changed power structures, leaving many precariously

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employed lecturers facing insecurities and disengagement from their university work and life. Increasing "customer" orientations in the HE market with changes to fee regimes could see students present longer than lecturers on short term fixed contracts. The advent of these ways of working was commented upon in Gallup's (2017) workplace study.

The very nature of work in a seemingly transient digital sphere brings further institutionally-orientated difficulties to academics, particularly those on precarious contracts. This study examines processes for how changing policies and subsequent practices within these institutions are duly transitioning perceptions of workplace and associated academic identities. The normalisation of the digital space as integral to student experience, and corresponding staff metrics, is one such transitionary arena. This provides a focus for our study hearing narratives of lecturers found to be experiencing a form of digital 'enclosure' (Hall, 2013).

Whilst the term "digital enclosure" is not widespread in relation to HE, some articles use Marxist analyses to consider other online spaces. Boyle (2003: 37) raises online space as a kind of commons, and digital as a "second enclosure movement". Andrejevic, (2007: 296) in his discussion on surveillance, raises concerns of obscuration of control online. He uses digital enclosure to theorise forms of productivity and monitoring. This is referred to as a process encompassing strategies for "privatising, controlling and commodifying information and intellectual property" (Andrejevic, 2007: 301) Whilst his work is applied to *an* enclosure for example Google business models and application to data enablement and ownership, parallel questions can be raised for academia.

This paper therefore considers changing roles in higher education teaching and concurrent impacts of precarity alongside new digital solutions. One facet under consideration are concerns relating to increasing mass production approaches to teaching which appears to be transitioning away from collegiate academic cultures. Teaching in cost-orientated digital institutions appears predominantly orientated towards online student supervision and grading, as distinct from a research "superstar". This has given traction towards managerial impositions of reduced contractual status for a digital underclass of lecturers as we will discuss later in more depth.

We attempt to capture changing dialogues and subjectivities of organisational life thoughtfully to progress the contribution of Knights and Clarke's (2014) study of academics. Whereas they focus on career aspects, we turn our lens to transitional

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interplay between physical and digital teaching environments. We examine narratives of teaching staff adapting to sometimes enforced, transitioned digital teaching roles. Along with Clarke and Knights (2015) we found compliances to imposed metrics. For some, this provoked undercurrents of anxiety as staff attempted to materialise from liminal (Beech, 2011; Turner, 1987) identities through behaviours that were "sticky" (Beech, 2011; Sturdy et al, 2006) and visible to the institutions. Elsewhere, we heard constructed mechanisms for survival, and sometimes gaming the system whilst retaining surface compliances. This article therefore examines the impacts of managerialism and the role of digital disruption in universities, before going on to discuss implications for academic identity work.

Literature

NPM, Managerialism and new educational futures

Since the financial crisis, there has been much written about whether "neoliberalism is dying" (e.g. Meadway, 2019) or exists only in "zombie" form (e.g. Green and Lavery, 2018). In theory, this should mean a questioning of its application to public sector life via new public management principles (NPM). However, massification and the implementation of digital teaching in the higher education sphere appear to be giving its ideological approaches a new lease of life. This has been exacerbated in the UK with the introduction of varying fee regimes. Whilst the relative recency of digital teaching should be provoking debate about its conditions, Crouch's (2011:26) assertion that use of the market to resolve a question pushes it beyond ethical judgement appears to be holding water here.

Academics are becoming managed professionals and Ylijoki and Ursin (2013:1136) state our work is no longer represented by "academic freedom, self-regulation and autonomy, but instead by the steering and monitoring of institutional management". This enables both creation of star academics who have increased capacity for research output, contrasting with those who have increased teaching-only contracts. Fixed-term part-time employment increase as de facto ways of working in universities become part of coping responses to funding issues and marketisation. However, conditions appear inconsistently applied, with star academics seeming to retain more independence, and changes more applicable to supporting groups of teaching academics. Offering a brief glimpse of a future of short bite sized online courses which benefits financial

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stakeholders via cost-effective flexibility , Kaplan and Haenlein (2016: 442) point to a glib neoliberalised future of star-faculty supported by faceless supernumeraries.

HEIs are adopting more normative organisational and bureaucratic perspectives, as noted by Enders (2016) and Huisman (2016) . Carvalho and Videira (2019:762) write that traditional collegiate, collective decision-making processes are being subsumed by top-down managerial approaches, in response to market orientations. They posit that this results in deprofessionalisation with power and control, "moving from the hands of academics to the hands of managers or to administrative staff". The suggested impact, results in a reconfiguration in professional autonomy, with managers taking more responsibility for university decision-making.

In in this rejuvenated NPM, the enabling qualities of technology are allowing universities to demand increased output, teaching, and compliance. The visible digital teaching arena furthers the potential to increase levels of scrutiny. Comparing tenured academics and those on fixed contracts, Whelan (2015) and Ng (2015), acknowledge that universities as communities of intellectual integrity are in crisis, particularly in the emergence of multi-tier workforces. Both authors comment on evolution from autonomous academic to continuous subjections to audits and accountability. This is also evident not only in the managerial aspect of academic life but impinges on teaching itself, in particular online with associated technological innovations (Myers et al, 2018). A neoliberal culture serves to stratify academic life creating silos of tenured and non-tenured academics, the system being emboldened by its capability to use digital platforms to monitor faculty online presenteeism.

Lorenz (2012) discussed this concept of NPM of higher education, particularly noting increasing student ratios and accompanying decreasing core of tenured staff. This movement results in an erosion of the profession to a mass production line.
The need for critical examination of digital HE futures is key. This was explored by Hall (2013: 54), who discusses reshaping of "deterministic, socio-economic discourses of efficiency, personalisation and networked individualism that underpin the technologically-mediated University". Hall considers how a previously socialised good is now in the process of privatisation via Marxist perspectives. Citing Harvey (2011), Hall visualises educational technologies inside a broader system of enclosure, extracting academic labour by moving more work online and blurring classifications of administration and teaching. The online distance learning sector is particulary sparse

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for research concerning individual experiences, perceptions and academic identity (Harris, Myers and Ravenswood 2017:708).

Trends towards audit and control lend themselves to academics "tick boxing" what they know will be measured despite activities not necessarily having value (Knights, 2006). Clarke and Knights (2015:1875) comment, 'to acquire the rules of law, the management techniques, and also the morality, the *ethos*, the practice, the self that will allow us to play these games with as little domination as possible'. New managerialist systems have brought changes to how individuals gain sense of their own value, no longer primarily derived from professional competence, knowledge and practice. Instead, internalised surveillance as part of enforced commitment to continuous improvement presses "subjects into making and remaking themselves as legitimate and appropriate(d)"Davies (2003:92-3).

The following section turns to the impact of NPM on academic identites.

Identity

Social identity is developed via discourses intertwining with self-identity as our internal view of self within continuous constructions of self (Watson, 2009). Beech (2011: 286) writes of "projection of others towards the self, projection of the self towards others and reactions to perceived projections". Ybema et al (2009:301) refer back to Goffman (1959), exploring identity as a bridge between the individual and the society within which they find themselves. Identity formation is seen as a "complex, multi-faceted process", that is socially negotiated, "between self-presentation and labelling by others, between achievement and ascription and between regulation and resistance". Identities and identifications remain concerned with definitions of the self when compared to other groups, whether organisational or occupational (Ashforth and Mael 1989).

Gabriel and Connell (2010:507) highlight the value of storytelling in sensemaking and communicating experiences. This sensemaking is described by Weick, Sutcliffe and Obsfield (2009:409) as a process "in which people concerned with identity in the social context of other actors engage ongoing circumstances from which they extract cues and make plausible sense retrospectively". Narrative stories serve as common reference points. 'Identity is constructed and understood by the stories told to and by individuals' (Martin, Lord and Warren-Smith, 2018:3) proposing, that to maintain positive self-image individuals are selective in their choice of memory and experience. Turning to

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Vygotsky and Lévi-Strauss for "internalisation" Bruner (2003: 98-100) characterise how we takeover and emulate established ways of talking and telling as bricolage.

In certain circumstances, Beech (2011), proposes that our 'self' can be responsive, reacting to external pressures by either rejecting or accepting an identity that is forced upon us. This can bolster aspects of selves as a response to identity threats.

Academics will actively or collectively undergo a process of accomplishing identities; how we present our 'self' in our everyday lives that reveals how we try to construct our being (Goffman, 1959). Whilst when Goffman conceived of presentations of self, a digital self in everyday life could not have been envisaged, his understandings of interactions at moments of crisis and maintenance of key impressions and acceptability remains critical to conversations about identity work (Goffman, 1990:166).

Whilst Feather (2018) acknowledges academic identity can be difficult to define, Martin et al (2018:4) suggest that it is based on a co-creation by the university and the academic of what they do, and what they are expected to do and that matching behaviours may become more marked during disruptive change.

Furthering notions of compatibility to digital academic experiences Beech (2011: 286) sees a digital self as an extension of self, rejecting or accepting externally imposed identities. He considers liminality within identity as being 'betwixt and between'. Furthering this, we can identify digital academic work as undergone within transitional states, forming a composition from anthropological and organisational literatures.

Reedy and Learmouth (2011:124) discuss how managerial practices can result in 'unthinking regulation of our selves', and this is antagonised as managers lurk, and judge unseen in the panopticon of digitised learning spaces. Implications of what such continuous observation might mean to an 'authentic' self (Costas and Fleming, 2009) to perceive self as foreign or unreal are important for consideration within developing digital, and/or digital precarious spheres.

Further implications of digital precarious spheres include moving beyond current 'tiering' to potential future stigmatisations of adjunct, liminal teaching roles. Building on Goffman's views , Kreiner et al (2006:633) propose that stigma results in lower self-esteem and identity destruction for individuals. They argued that the greater the external threat caused by a stigma or taint the more likely people will develop collective defence tactics. An explanation for this comes from Butler (1997:20) who

proposed that "where social categories guarantee a recognisable and enduring social existence, the embrace of such categories, even as they work in the service of subjection, is often preferred to no social existence at all".

Davido et al (2001) also cited by Kreiner et al (2006) discussed how an occupational stigma might be controlled. If we enter an occupation that is, or becomes stigmatized, (or tainted) then we perceive this as being our own fault. This is not dissimilar to recent contestations around neoliberal meritocracy (e.g. Littler, 2018).

Using discourse and narrative academics undertake identity work, understanding who they are and who and what they are becoming in response to any proposed taint, stigma, or lessening of status. We argue that this is accomplished under conditions of threat, (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003) and in consequence poses greater challenges to online academics. We examine such implications of tainting, and perceived status change upon the digitised sections of academic teaching life, positing that, NPM and managerialism add another 'underdog' layer to the profession of online teaching.

Research design

Adopting a practical-hermeneutic framework (Alvesson et al, 2008: 17) of ethnographic approaches, we hear narratives from two HE contexts: one a UK institution (UNI A) embracing a digital strategy, as both innovation and cost saving, the other, a US-accredited institution (UNI B), using mimetic digitised strategies as international teaching currency enhancement. Whilst the UK institution had experienced intensive change strategies to teaching delivery via digitisation, the US accredited university was promoting digital as a complement, growing expertise in a more organic fashion.

We used photographs, enabling co-creation of knowledge and as artefacts enabling the creation of an 'anchor' of physicality to immaterial facets of presenting digital selves. We undertook eighteen semi-structured face-to-face interviews as part of a more encompassing ethnographic approach. Respondents were asked to take and bring several photographs along to the interview along with a short text that portrayed for them what it meant to be an academic in their varying teaching environments. Fieldwork encompassed workplace observations using Knoblauch's (2005) framework for focussed ethnography. Given that all three researchers fitted the criteria of intimate knowledge of the field, with one having extensive experience of lecturing roles in both

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UK and US pedagogy, using this approach facilitated researcher choices within funding parameters, and limited time for 'hanging out' (Alvesson et al, 2008: 21).

Interview questions were given in advance to help secure a reflective fabula (Bruner, 2003) and comfort in sharing. Including respondents' own choice of images and the way they chose to present themselves were interesting findings in their own right as well as an aide to individuals who might have difficulty considering professional selves reflexively. In this way, the singularity of what was chosen for recording (Barthes, 2000: 76) facilitated transition between actor and spectator roles for participants, aiding what Knoblauch (2005:3) refers to as '"bestrangement" of the familiar'. Whilst not the fully collaborative approach advocated by Pink (2013), the preparatory work allowed participants time to consider and frame ideas prior to discussion.

Some respondents interpreted instructions literally, for example, showing themselves in the classroom. Others depicted working tools, office posters, or other organisational symbols (University logos or office doors). Others considered ideas of 'identity' more actively, one (UNI B) academic for example, provided an image of a long empty corridor to symbolise online students. Thus, the photographs became individual artefacts for discussion, exchange and negotiation (see Pink, 2013).

Data analysis of transcripts, photographs and personal texts was undertaken in three steps; firstly, via independent open coding (as per Glaser and Strauss, 1999). First-order themes were then drawn from the transcripts and used as Nvivo headings. Given the large amount of data, this was undertaken manually, and then via Nvivo to check manual clustering. We went on to draw insights as a form of second order themes as per Corley and Gioia (2004).

Collins (2018) proposed a design thinking approach that we adopted here, which builds on the seminal work of Van Maanen (1979). He posited within an ethnographic investigation that first-order concepts are the 'facts' and second-order concepts are the 'theories' that the researcher uses to explain the patterning of the first order data. We used first-order concepts as data clusters and second-order concepts as insights to explain the patterning. The difference being that second-order concepts are not yet theories but rather insights into the situation which would then be further analysed.

Using a socially-constructed context we followed Gioia et al (2012:17) assuming participants are 'knowledgeable agents'; because they know what they are trying to do and are trying to explain themselves. By using first-order concepts and

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second-order themes and not relating our data to existing theory and terminology initially, we drew out insights of the participants sensemaking. Through clustering data samples, we gained understanding of participants experiences, allowing their voices to come through rather than having a priori judgements imposed. As trusted interviewers we helped create those narratives; as fellow lecturers we acknowledge that our own feelings on institutional changes contributed to both tone and content of responses.

We became sympathetic with Boje's (2008) ideas on antenarrative, as fragmented and non-linear storytelling, as narratives emerged through the discussions facilitated by the photographs. However, as this was one period of ethnographic study, we were unable to take a longitudinal approach. In consequence, although in agreement with Boje's notion of temporality, we could not feature this here. We are able however, to support Gabriel's view that individual's oral stories are plastic (2004:72) in comparison to formal organisational stories in the written format. Whilst taking and thinking about photographs in advance brought some linearity and helped elicit the story in a more developed manner, we acknowledge the limitation of our study being over one set period in time.

Discussion.

Interesting patterning emerged during data analysis, where many stories followed the participant leading with a University instigated change, and then articulating and often justifying their response to it. One feature of the plasticity of these stories was their presentation in dialectic form, e.g. that *they* did *x,* therefore *I* responded with *y.* In this way, stories could be classified between what was *done-to* them as respondents, and what was *done-by* them in return. This supports literature themes of digital application of NPM and subsequently academic identity work. Some of the responses showed distinct feelings of insecurity within their narratives, undergoing emotional labour and ongoing classification. Others had clearly already taken time to rationalise their situation in advance of the interview, displaying attributes of valence to their behaviours. These manifested in a series of discourses, (first order sorting), which we then sorted into second-order themes below: *attempts at materiality, advantage through specialisation* and *real-time responses and realpolitik.*

Attempts at Materiality

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Ubiquity in digital offerings has resulted in moves out of the classroom and into digitised workspaces. Whilst for some this has resulted in a blended approach (such as in UNI B), for others teaching has moved mainly online (e.g. UNI A). Whilst institutions promoted didactic and normative flexibility and efficiency as a result of digitisation, participants shared a range of experiences resulting from practice changes. Respondents teaching online reported feeling less close to and integrated with their University. This was to the extent that it was difficult for researchers to separate whether feelings of being 'other' were driven mainly by digital and/or by the precarious contracts that some held. Difficulty separating neoliberalism's affects from other trends and behaviours in the sector was similarly reported by Danvers (2019:5). Loss of '*corridor contacts*' as illustrated from the photo of an empty corridor (UNI B05) and resultant potential opportunities was noted by online teachers. This feeling of alienation produced a range of responses, some respondents sought out specific opportunities to feel more included, whilst others rationalised the lack of inclusion by matching behaviours of disengagement.

Identity work that sought to find both emotional and physical space for digitised teaching staff was a consistent theme. Respondents reported several differences between environments which were physically present and intangible digital spheres. This was both in terms of teaching interactions with students and colleagues and the way they went about daily routines. They expressed discomfort with a digital panopticon, where "*every ten minutes of the course is written out [*detailed by *others]*" (UNI A02). This was contrasted with the fluid, owned and bounded, *private* space of the classroom, and its *"closed door"* as evidenced by images supplied by a number of participants *(*e.g. UNI B07*).* Several reported reduced bonds with students in a digital environment, particularly when working with enlarged and shared cohorts online. For example: "*I'm no longer tutoring my students exclusively…. others also teach them on the same module, I'm having to restrict what I'm doing*" (UNI A01). This was particularly the case in UNI A, where recent digitisation strategies allowed students to attend any online teaching group for their module. A few respondents noted discomfort with online sessions being recorded, which management could listen to as well as students, and faculty (and students) were warier of what they said.

Some digital and precarious staff sought to counter perceived digital side-lining and so leave 'sticky' markers of their presence within the university, whether through outreach, or participating in legitimisation rituals such as graduation and department meetings: "*I*

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kind of feel obliged" … take advantage of …interacting." (UNI B03). These appeared as emotional, forced reactions in compensation for being less present and therefore 'other'. Where they were blocked from participation, often due to governance rules, there was often a profound sense of loss, even though activities were extra-curricular and unpaid. One had organised fieldwork for the students: *"...I had set up this trip…but because I was adjunct, I couldn't take the students…I was very disappointed.* (UNI B07).

Digital teachers were aware of gaps in institutional knowledge due to both status and a lack of presence to find out what was going on, which some actively sought to smooth e.g. *"since I'm an adjunct, I might not have the whole story. I don't always get information the same way* [as] *other full-time staff….* (UNI B07).

Others rationalised their response to how they felt the University had treated them as employees, moderating their behaviours according to the type of contract, or attempted to justify limited investment through valence, "*…well I've only got a contract for the next six months, you know, it's not worth me investing my time and effort in creating that community of practice"* (UNI B06).

Advantage through Specialisation

The increasing ease of comparison and measurement of online activities from managers has led to greater similarities in courses and outcomes and corresponding metrics levied at teachers. Some consciously evaluated these changes to their workplace, e.g. UNI B02, who commented on still having "*wonderful academic freedom*" tempering this with the comment that "*we are losing as things become more standardised with greater online offerings … you lose the richness of you as an individual."*

Lack of employment rights in UNI B was acknowledged as constraining and ensuring compliance for these participants. Precarity in UNI A produced similar outcomes due to market factors and limited tenured roles.

A response for some to being made 'the same' was to consciously make themselves different and find a special place or skill to validate themselves. This was variously described as being *flexible*, *never moaning*, *reliable*, or having *scarce/ demonstrable skills'*. UNI A02 provided a photo of himself taken outside a prison before doing a tutorial with offender learners. Respondents articulated their unique place through specialisation, such as significant industry experience and their professional network access. In several discussions, they explored how they actively

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promoted aspects of self: *"to be an academic is very prestigious, and so I find that because I have a professional background as well as an academic background that there are numerous opportunities" (UNI B 03).*

Many respondents were positive about particular skills and their contribution to their working lives and institutions in turn. Some reported taking time to seek out similarly employed academics and share opportunities to replicate more traditional networking opportunities. Those respondents with a strong focus on the pedagogic requirements when teaching online actively focused on leading students through masses of online information and consciously developing students' critical thinking skills as opposed to simply providing knowledge.

"*It's given them more data and less information. The cognition of what's out there is less. There is more out there online but the way students comprehend and use it is less*" (UNI A04).

However, there was a suggestion that these pedagogic and other skills were being ever more measured and supervised. They also noted the impact of increased administrative burdens on their tutoring role, often being asked to do tasks that reflected the immediate need of the organisation, rather than fitted to their specialist skill set. Part of this was due to a reduction in admin support in a digital environment as institutions seek to gain more value from employees through compressing administration into the academic role, "*Now it all seems to be all about administration and solving problems*." (UNI A 05).

Real-time responses and realpolitik – a balancing act

Digital teaching and student interaction proved central to interviews. Respondents from both institutions reported increased ability to engage with more students with the development of digital platforms. This was directly evidenced through online library and resource access as well as via larger class sizes. All reported the need for flexibility in approach and changing culture in academia with key criteria still remaining as being about "*supporting students…about challenging them, and…finding new ways to do that…*" (UNI B04).

Positives included reach for large audiences for appropriate events such as library briefings, contrasted with the need to reflect upon online pedagogy and changing skill sets for varying class sizes. Concerns were raised from those who wanted to

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preserve smaller group relationships e.g. (UNI A05): "*I'm this one special person for that person doing the module, but they can be just one in 100 to me at any one time. And it's how do I make sure that all of those 100 are just as important…when I'm working in a digital environment and I may have very, very limited contact…."*

Tensions over decision making in pedagogic choices rather than management "rollouts" of one-size-fits-all were raised. Where online teaching decisions were appropriate and pedagogically sound, respondents referred to new ideas e.g. (UNI B 02) *"I came to shift proudly from being [an]…authority…to…a mentor...I really feel happy about that"*.

Where the shift to digital had more nuanced implications was in the practicalities of managing an "always on" environment. Some were able to get a benefit such as being able to reply to students whilst travelling on holiday (photo supplied by UNIA03). Others reported tensions in maintaining balance between offering the best learner support and meeting expectations. There was a growing awareness that with digitisation comes expectations of real-time responses. Teachers were aware that they could not always meet expectations on a practical level and that feeding this need was not always in learners' best interests. Tutors aimed to build learning skills and resilience in students, and so responding to needs rather than immediate wants should be balanced. However, response times were highlighted from student surveys, and tutors were aware of potential impacts of perceived negative student feedback on their precarious contractual situation. This flexibility came out in discussion of changing work hours in UNI A , with one being texted after midnight with an assignment problem, and feeling they had to respond, "*…fortunately, I'm not the early to bed type…."* (UNI A 02). In this instance, the tutor reported just "*a voice of calm"* was needed, but that the student was *"expecting an instant answer almost."*

The "*quick fire*" (UNI A 02) environment and often erroneous responses on social media was acknowledged by one respondent who contrasted internal moderated sites, and who felt the need for greater resilience and kindness all round.

The flip of the "quick fire" scenario was also felt as part of teaching roles with some students reported as "going dark" at times, and no physical markers of attendance in the digital environment. One respondent commented: "*really incredibly frustrating when it goes completely silent…* deliberating whether this *"is a reflection of people changing behaviour…*" (UNI A05).

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Implications

As seen in the contextual information and the themes explored above, a reduction in tenured roles and erosion of contractual rights, coupled with trends toward hourly or semester paid teaching has resulted in increasingly precarious situations.

As digital environments are increased and physical reduced, academics are undergoing identity work to find out who they are becoming. They are experiencing new, forced identities projected on to themselves which they are either rejecting or accepting, using their own agency to adapt as best they can. This is demonstrated above dialectically, whether via rationalisation of effort, projecting a USP (unique selling point) , or 'sticky' behaviours to demonstrate their value, or even a physical presence. This was summed up by UNI A06; "*The option to have some kind of interaction is ……better than not".*

Using photographic ethnography, we saw growing evidence of separation of the academic identity and self-identities as participants explained their lives and understanding of roles as they journey down the road of increasing development of digital education. They explained this as needing to justify their niche or value to others, questioning who they were becoming professionally. They were trying to be seen to do the tasks that are being observed and evaluated in order to maintain a modicum of control over their lives. They are pushed into a situation where they try to portray elements of themselves that are valued and that give them a competitive edge. Where the physical is reducing and the digital increasing there are fewer physical cues academics can use to interpret, to construct, and adapt self. They question their value more in an environment where autonomy and professionalism are decreasing. However, in adapting that compliant face, small acts of resistance were key to narratives of surviving, or, even thriving.

Concluding remarks

Recalling ideas from Marx (2013:465), the digital arena has proved an enabler toward the creation of what can be seen as becoming a "nomadic" population of distributed and untethered educational workers. In some ways, online teaching staff are part of a new digital proletariat. Reconfiguration of the digital space in education is then normative. Harvey talks about the "unanalysed scale problem" for sensible management of

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resources (Harvey, 2011:102-4) and the conundrum of whose interests we seek to protect, in this case, the cultural commons of education at its increasingly global scale.

Debates around the meaning of teaching, and teacher identities, particularly online, are gaining traction outside the academy, often prompted by the macro context of rapid changes in society and work. In the US, for example, *Forbes* reports on recent consultations from the Department of Education that propose to change meanings of educational terms – i.e. what colleges can do, and what degrees mean. Newton (2019) writes of implications for "the very meaning of instructor". Implementation of such measures would then add further distance between an expert academic, and faceless supporting team.

There is significant applicability here to studies in other sectors such as discourses of digital labour at Uber and Lyft as reported by Malin , Brenton and Chandler (2017:396-7. They raise important questions about the onus of responsibility and future policymaking for contingent workers. Similar points questioning differentiations for new models and patterns of work organisations are also made by Huws, Spencer and Syrdal (2018). A UK Government Report (Taylor et al 2017:75) specifically links current labour market adaptations to the digital age, and a need to both confront and respond to perceptions of what these flexible arrangements may mean in practice for workforces. However, whilst resonant with practical recommendations for the importance of fairness and dignity in future workplaces, as heralded by a fourth industrial revolution, emotional aspects of such labour remain largely unstudied. Competitive advantage from these new business models may be regulated by government legislation to facilitate this in a positive way.

At the individual level, reductions in tenured roles coupled with eroding contractual rights and trends towards hourly-paid teaching have resulted in precarious work and associated practices. Our findings support the work of Ylijoki and Ursin (2013: 1135) who state that "narratives of resistance, loss, administrative work overload and job insecurity are embedded in a regressive storyline." Uncertainty of the digital workspace, in parallel with supervisory increases has resulted in teaching, appearing in some cases as reduced to mechanistic, process-driven approaches riven with emotional labour. We appear to be losing academia as a critique of society (concurring with Clarke and Knights; 2015). Efforts by teachers are diverted towards being compliant, "sticky"

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and visible with frantic attempts to "belong" despite an othered status. The neoliberalised digital environment seems to provoke a faster pace of identity work, which Davies (2003:93) refers to as a "continually changing individual".

However, we also noted a secondary picture as some discourses of successful coping mechanisms emerged, with individuals compensating and applying valence in response to workplace changes at the individual level. For example, in some cases teachers were starting to instigate spontaneous, online groups which replicate the physical manifestation of 'water cooler' moments through supportive virtual networks. These acts of compensation were undertaken on a personal, or social level, largely unseen by their employers.

Universities are starting to recognise symptoms and actions from a precarious and increasingly digitised academic workforce. Within the changing landscape of today's digital age and the associated macro environmental drivers for change, educators are impelled to explore these new horizons and perspectives in education. This needs to be balanced with ongoing evaluation of the impact of such teaching strategies and developing ways and means of supporting teachers as individuals and members of an academic community.

Further research

It is aimed to repeat the same data collection to see how the narratives have evolved, including theorisations from Boje (2008) and Gabriel (2004) on aspects of temporality and plasticity in narratives within the precarious digital workspace. In the interim further exploration in terms of making improvements for digital staff, such as building communities of practice, has already started.

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Thank you so much to reviewers for their positive and motivating comments here. We appreciate the thoughtful guidance and spirit of collegiality that pervades them. Please find below our responses to the reviewers' suggestions.

Reviewer 1

1. Differences and points of connection. We recognise the input of reviewers here, and after some reflection, have decided that Uni 1 was further down the continuum than Uni 2, and therefore made that the focus of the comparison rather than the geographical location.

2. Use of acronyms – we have gone through the paper and addressed this (e.g. MOOC etc). We have also looked to frame where possible in recognition of the reviewer's remarks of commonality of experience.

3. We have withdrawn the explicit reference to Fordismi used mass production instead given that this is a subject area in itself. However, the use of 'sticky' was taken from a contribution by Beech () so we have made that link stronger. We also appreciate the note that there were others, so we have gone through and amended these e.g. Sturdy2006 and Turner 1987.

4. We have reworked the section looking at the proletariat in terms of making recognition of the value of the comments here on Marx.

5. Thank you to the reviewer who noted the author led comments in page 7, we are grateful for this amendment and have revised the literature accordingly.

6. The points made about the photographs were interesting, and perhaps we were too cautious in using them initially, so we have worked to develop their inclusion in the discussion

Reviewer 2.

1. Reviewer 2 agreed with reviewer 1 in relation to the comparison element – see response above.

2. It was difficult to respond to reviewer 2's comments in relation to democratisation at the OU, as that may be congruent with conditions of open access to students. However, recent political challenges at the OU have led to a period of intense change which mirrored neoliberalist and NPM characteristics. The result of neoliberalist policies led to a conflation with the new digitised environments in this instance.

   However, we did find the reviewer's ideas about a hybrid identity to be very interesting. We did try to include these ideas in our revision to the paper, but as we could not find evidence in the literature, we decided not to pursue this angle this time. We did like the analogy however and would like to include it as part of questioning and framing in a future study.

3. The reviewer's comments on the balance between NPM and the "digital curtain" are valid, and we have attempted to address this with a more detailed discussion on Weber, and the impact of technological innovation on identity. We avoided too much discussion on this in the initial submission, lest it identify the organisation too readily, but have reworked to enable greater understanding for an external audience.

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4. Reviewer 2 also highlights a number of specific areas that needed justification, which are responded to below:

    a. P17 – teaching as a life choice and passion – we have deleted this phrase.

    b. page 6 that there is a 'distinct lack of research into the neoliberal university on individual experiences, perceptions and academic identity'. We have toned this down but also put this in the context of distant learning

    c. why is loneliness a possible implication of the digital teaching evolution (see page 3)? We have referenced a recent article from Harvard Business review dealing with this issue.
    d. The comments that "Some paragraphs need work" is valid in some respects, so we have, as part of any review, looked to sharpen up here.

    e. We have addressed the issue in relation to "emerging articles", thank you for picking this up.
    f. The comments on Marx were also noted by reviewer 1, so we have looked to address this paragraph above.

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