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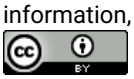
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Exploring the concept of the digital educator during COVID-19

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In this paper, we explore academic identity, specifically the identity of the educator in higher education and academics' conceptualisations of the digital educator. We suggest that the concept of a digital educator is not only about technology, tools and uses. The context for this exploration is academics' participation in an online professional development module, Digital Education, and the "pivot online" (Weller, 2020a) during campus closures caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Through qualitative research, we explored participants' sense of teaching identity, whether they had or have a concept of being a digital educator and the extent to which these identities might have shifted while the campus closure continued. We present analysis of their accounts and reflect on the implications of this analysis, particularly in relation to organisational digital capacity defined as "the skills, competencies, attitudes, infrastructure, and resources that enable people to work, live and learn in a world that is increasingly digital world" (National Forum, 2018, p. iv). We consider how higher education institutions will cope with the complex challenges facing us and suggest ways in which the implications of this research could better enable institutions to navigate change and build organisational digital capacity.

Implications for practice or policy:

- The pivot to online teaching and assessment during the COVID-19 pandemic has had complex effects on professional identities which need to be researched and understood.
- Programme teams in campus-based institutions have experienced erosion of professional norms and relationships. They need support and leadership during the gradual return to campus.
- Faculty integrated technologies rapidly but unevenly into practice; therefore, the ongoing building of digital capacity and the shift towards post-digital pedagogies needs dedicated support and leadership.

Keywords: digital educator, digital capacity, professional identity, post-digital pedagogies, leadership, qualitative research

Introduction

This paper explores academic identity, specifically one aspect of academic identity – that of educator in higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic in spring 2020. We are academic professional development practitioners engaged in teaching on postgraduate programmes for staff teaching in higher education. We focus on the concept of *digital educator* and investigate the experiences of a group of academics participating in a new blended professional development accredited module titled Digital Education. The module was launched in February 2020 and aimed to explore key issues impacting on teaching and learning in higher education, and academic practice more broadly, in a digital world. Topics discussed included digital skills, policy, theory, digital identity, open education, the impact of digital technologies on teaching and learning and academics' use of social media. Our research was initially planned to explore and reflect on issues of educator identity in light of their participation in the module and examine potential shifts in identity. However, at the midpoint in the module schedule, our campus, TU Dublin, was suddenly closed owing to the COVID-19 pandemic. Lecturers across the institution, including those participating in the module, experienced the "pivot online" (Weller, 2020a), moving to online teaching in a matter of a couple of days. Amongst the challenges this presented us was that of framing questions around changes in practice, when the change to online was so apparent and obvious. Further practical challenges arose as we flipped to remote working. We nonetheless pursued the research in order to examine participants' sense of teaching identity and conceptualisations of being a digital educator during

and after the module, using this analysis to consider digital capacity and how we will navigate the complex challenges facing us in the near future.

Digital education is not a new phenomenon: for many years, the potential of digital technologies for enhancing teaching and learning has been discussed and challenges therein explored (Weller, 2020b, 2020c). Our focus on identity stems from the key role that identity plays in determining one's approach or actions, or the extent to which one feels enabled to act (Nykvist & Mukherjee, 2016). In this context, the action that we were particularly interested in was academic engagement with, and the use of, digital technologies for teaching within their disciplinary context. Reflecting on our experience teaching this new module, we considered whether our participants' identities were inclusive of the concept of being a digital educator. We discussed what this might mean to them and whether their identity shifted or adapted as they participated in the module.

From these discussions, we formulated a set of evaluative questions (see Appendix). Due to the COVID-19 pivot, we further considered how the pivot online might affect their identities as educators. We wanted to find out if their simultaneous participation in the module impacted their experience of, and actions during, the pivot. In tandem with evaluating experiences during the module, we sought to explore whether any shifts in identity were evident and how their future approaches to digital education might be influenced. This paper aims to shed light on these questions. It begins by outlining the theoretical framework used to underpin this qualitative empirical study and then details the methodology adopted to carry out the research. Results are presented and discussed with a focus on three key emerging themes: identity, change and responses to change.

Theoretical framework

Academic identity can encompass multiple identities (e.g., researcher, disciplinary expert, educator) which have been explored in-depth in educational research (Quigley, 2011). Research examining professional identities in education has shown us that identity is not a single fixed object inhabited by the teacher or lecturer (Avidov-Ungar & Forkosh-Baruch, 2018). Rather, it is in flux and socially situated, determined by the contexts in which we find ourselves. Each individual has multiple identities, including those associated with their race, gender and sexual orientation as well as identities associated with professional roles (Gaither, 2019). For the purposes of this paper, we focus on the educator and the teaching identity of academics teaching or lecturing in TU Dublin in Ireland. Our understanding of lecturer identity in this paper draws on theoretical insights into educator identity, along with the influence of digital capacity, to establish the theoretical framework for our research. We are focusing here on how lecturer identities are potentially changed or expanded by engaging in using digital tools, technologies and resources. The context for this examination is the Digital Education module taking place during the early weeks of campus closure due to COVID-19.

We acknowledge that identity is fluid and dynamic, evolving in context (Quigley, 2011). Notwithstanding this, we suggest that for academic development practitioners it is important to engage with academics in exploration of their identities as educators in order to deepen our understanding of practice and support enhancement of that practice. We suggest that this work is all the more important at critical moments, such as the point at which campuses closed in Ireland in March 2020 (RTÉ, 2020).

Educator identity in the Digital Education module

Our colleagues and participants in the Digital Education module were educators within their discipline areas. We also knew that most had previous professional roles in business and industry associated with their disciplines. Our context is that of a new technological university in Ireland, TU Dublin. We specialise in applied programmes in Engineering, Business, Arts and Tourism, Sciences and Health, with an emphasis on small-group teaching, industry experience, and fieldwork. Ireland's institutes of technology and emergent technological universities focus on the application of research and knowledge to practice and the professions. Programmes range from apprenticeship level to doctoral degrees. Teaching schedules are heavier than in traditional research-intensive universities, with academics typically undertaking 18–20 hours teaching weekly. Academics may have moved into lecturing from professional practice, may move back again and may combine teaching with continuing professional roles. Lecturer professional identity in this context incorporates aspects of professional identity from previous career roles. This is seen as a

positive dimension since lecturers bring direct reference to their career experience into their teaching. This aspect of professional identity may link with digital capacity: in some of their fields, lecturers may have used digital technologies very extensively and for specialist work before beginning to teach in higher education. In other fields, this may have been minimal and lecturers may lack confidence in using a range of technologies (National Forum, 2020a).

Digital capability and educator identity

Defined broadly, digital capability refers to the skills and attitudes that individuals and organisations need in order to live, work and learn in today's digital society (JISC, 2017). From an individual perspective, building digital capability is about much more than developing proficiency with information and communications technology. It encompasses a range of literacies including accessing and critically managing new sources of information and media, developing new communicative and collaborative skills in the online environment, using digital tools to create, innovate and solve problems and, importantly, managing your digital identity and well-being (JISC, 2018). Undoubtedly, the impact of technology and moving into a digital age has been, and will continue to be, a challenge. This is evident not only in the manner in which technology has changed classrooms and higher educational institutions in the last two decades (Weller, 2020b) but also in the accelerated speed of this change worldwide in 2020 (National Forum, 2020b).

The development of digital capacity is interwoven with the identity of those who teach (Avidov-Ungar & Forkosh-Baruch, 2018; Quigley, 2011). Therefore, embracing the full potential of digital technology for teaching and learning poses a challenge for many educators not only because it affects their culture but also because they need the infrastructure provided by their institutions, which play a key role in this embracement (Hodges et al., 2020; JISC, 2022). In this regard, developing our digital capabilities at organisational and educator level poses a fundamental challenge to the structures, assumptions, policies and procedures of our institutions, and importantly our underpinning epistemological and ontological beliefs and attitudes regarding the role and nature of knowledge and higher education itself. It is possible to see that digital capability and digital capacity are deeply interconnected in the context of this research; hence, both will be used throughout this paper.

Digital educator

The previous section has argued that the development of digital capacity is essential for individuals and organisations, but for educators this can be challenging both as individuals and as members of their organisations. The concept of a digital educator has emerged to indicate the increasing complexity of the ways in which technology mediates educational processes (Englund et al., 2017). We suggest that the concept of a digital educator is not only about technology, tools and uses. If this were the case, the use of technology in education would resemble the work of an engineer using a new tool or system. Our conceptualisation of the digital educator instead considers a broader range of interconnected dimensions: technology, tools, communication and collaboration, teaching and learning, creation, innovation and well-being (National Forum, 2014). These are the interdimensional constituents of a digital educator.

Furthermore, underpinning all these dimensions, different roles associated with teaching in a digital world have emerged: assessor, pedagogical expert, technical and managerial specialist, researcher, adviser, professional and designer (Ní Shé et al., 2019). All of these roles and dimensions change the direction of our initial understanding of teaching and learning in higher education: we must find "new ways of dealing with information, working and learning in a digital environment, using time and information differently, and developing new versatility when it comes to interaction in learning environments" (National Forum, 2015, p. 17). Digital educators have the responsibility for developing capabilities and putting them into practice within the real context of their organisations.

Educator identity and campus closure

In Ireland, as in many other jurisdictions, the COVID-19 pandemic led to a decision to close the education sector. Beyond the consideration of specific emergency procedures, no consultation was possible, modes of work were changed within days, a unilateral decision was taken by the government and announced with immediate effect by the Taoiseach (prime minister) (RTÉ, 2020). Starr (2011) suggested that people might

resist change when they experience it as a threat to their identity due to changes of routine or common practices. Campus closures were a change that could not be resisted in the context of a public health emergency.

As such, it was a change which set up a number of questions around educator identity as we have defined it in this paper and in relation to digital capacity. Following the campus closure, many traditional views and responses to technology (Wendelboe, 2020) were subverted immediately, since there was no time for discussion or detailed consideration of the transition. The only way to continue with teaching, and to provide students with ways to continue in their programmes, was to move online. The sudden nature of this change has been summed up by the term "pivot" (Weller, 2020a).

As discussed earlier, we were particularly interested in finding out if our participants' identities were inclusive of the concept of being a digital educator. We wished to explore whether this term had meaning for them: first, in relation to their participation in the newly introduced Digital Education module, and second, in the context of the COVID-19 pivot online.

Methods

From the outset of the Digital Education module, we had planned to undertake research with our participants to examine potential shifts in their educator identity and how these shifts might impact on their actions as educators. The newly introduced module offered theoretical perspectives on technologies in education rather than focusing on digital skills and application of theory to practice. This represented a change from the previous offerings, and it was important to analyse whether this innovation was useful to our participants and how it could potentially influence actions/practice. We had planned a qualitative case study (Baskarada, 2014) examining potential shifts in thinking around digital education, and shifts in educator identity, which might in turn prompt changes in practice, and then potentially further reflection on digital education and how technologies mediate practice. This was planned to be undertaken through interviews with as many participants from the module as possible. We were unable to return to campus to conduct interviews after completion of teaching and assessment in early summer 2020. Telephone/online interviews were considered and have been used effectively in many studies (Szolnoki & Hoffmann, 2013). But as work schedules overall were delayed and became subject to urgent and conflicting demands both for participants and for us, a pragmatic approach was adopted. This was judged to be preferable to capture responses and experiences before many months had elapsed, when participants would no longer be able to recall their experiences of the module or of the immediate closure period in 2020.

The Appendix lists the interview questions. They were presented in the format of an online questionnaire, which could be completed with text-based responses or by voice-recording responses. The intention here was to enable participants to respond more quickly and easily by recording responses on their own devices and uploading the resulting file, rather than completing the questionnaire by typing.

Of 11 participants in the module, six responded. Three were participants in the overall Master of Science, Education programme offered by TU Dublin. Three were taking the module on a stand-alone basis for continuing professional development. Two participants were external to TU Dublin. One person opted to make a recording with awareness that they would be identifiable from the file, just as they would have been in an interview setting. The recording was fully transcribed and anonymised. Typed data and the transcribed recording were then analysed inductively to identify emergent themes using Terry et al.'s (2017) strategy. It is important to note that the transcribed recording was more detailed and lengthy than some of the questionnaire responses as it captured the verbal responses of the participant. However, the questionnaire responses were well-developed and substantive.

In relation to ethics, our department had a protocol approved by the institutional Research Ethics and Integrity Committee allowing us to conduct evaluation of modules and programmes using questionnaires, interviews and focus group formats following consistent themes relating to the programme content. This approved protocol was followed in the case of the current research. Information and consent forms followed the approved format and detailed appropriate and confidential storage of data. The questionnaire was administered online using institutional systems with two-stage authentication, and all information will be deleted once this research has been completed and published.

Findings

We present the initial analysis of our findings here, reflecting both the evaluation of the newly introduced Digital Education module and the broader exploration of potential shifts in identity surfacing during the module contemporaneous with the pivot to online teaching, learning and assessment. In the Discussion section, we interpret these results more fully with respect to the concepts of educator identity and digital capacity, which we introduced in the Theoretical framework section.

In relation to the composition of the data set and the professional profile of research participants, five out of six were lecturers with more than 11 years of experience, whereas one of them did not teach. The main motivations for participating in this module were to learn new skills, to develop awareness of contemporary issues in digital education, to gain a new understanding of digital education and to consider other ways of being creative or being more creative in teaching. The Master of Science, Education participants were also seeking credits towards their qualification. These responses reflect mixed perspectives on the module: although the module was intentionally more theoretical than previous digital skills modules on offer, some participants nonetheless sought new practical skills that they could apply in teaching. When asked what influenced changes in their teaching and assessment practices during the campus closure, all reported the rapid move to online teaching and assessment, as we anticipated. All respondents mentioned their participation in the module as a key influence in this process, alongside the need to cater for students' needs and requirements during the pandemic. In addition to these two key influences, the participants also reflected that direction from their heads of department and their engagement with other professional development were key factors that influenced their practices.

One person had been directed not to teach synchronously online in spite of the campus closure. This response was not anticipated. They reported using a combination of the virtual learning environment/learning management system, a public videoconference tool and email to work with students. They also reported providing support to students and seeking ways to keep lines of communication open with them: "a general chat to see how they were getting on, what the story was".

From the participants' perspectives, the module increased their confidence to fully move online, understanding what they could do and what they could not. Again, this finding emerged notwithstanding the theoretical focus of the module. Only one participant expressed some doubt related to support from the module for moving online. However, while our participants reported increased confidence online, this had only come about by necessity as they were "pushed online, would never have done otherwise". The module helped them also with considering the autumn 2020 semester, with one person commenting that it was a "lucky decision" to do the module in spring. Although the module learning outcomes were not focused on digital skills, participation during the move to online teaching encouraged them to engage more with online resources in general: "it certainly encouraged me to re-engage with social media … to see how national and international third level institutions were dealing with the pandemic, to gain insight into best practice". The module was not the only influence in how they approached the move to online learning: "if something needs to be done, it needs to be done and this is how you do it. And you find out the best ways of minimising any issues that might occur". These comments reflect perhaps a pragmatic approach from the participants, which in turn may reflect their identity as people teaching in our institution and continuing to teach a busy timetable following the pivot online. It may also be the case that as they learned online themselves, they were able to use some of that experience in designing online learning for their students. These findings reflect the complexity of developing digital capacity as the combination of digital skills with pedagogical expertise and changes in practice.

Participants responded positively when asked about institutional support and its flexible approach throughout the emergency, not only for them but for their students. Multiple accommodations and workshop opportunities emerged as examples and indicate the role of the institution in building digital capacity. However, participants also mentioned a number of challenges: some of these were outside the control of the institution (e.g., homeschooling while working), others could perhaps have been addressed (e.g., provision of essential hardware). They did have a sense of students' perceptions of how they were using technologies: all but one agreed that students perceived their use of technology as different to before the closure. Attendance by students at online classes was high, and students seemed to be appreciative of the efforts being made to maintain classes. Participants also highlighted the disparity in students' digital skills, for example: "I think we think that the students are very digitally literate, and they're not … they're

very digitally literate in terms of some aspects of social media … we sort of have this expectation that they are cottoned on to it and know exactly what to do and that's not the case". The difficulties in nurturing and maintaining staff-student relationships in a remote context were also highlighted: "as the move was halfway through the semester, social relations had been set up among students so that was a good start, but if this had not been established it would have been different and more challenging". Continuing these social relationships with students was a challenge, and it was noted that students were hesitant to contribute verbally in synchronous classes preferring to use chat features. For one participant, final-year students were also struggling with dissertation supervision online.

Participants also found new challenges working together online. The institutionally provided software for collaboration was used to facilitate team meetings, but informal discussions "to touch base" were not easy to have. Some participants felt they were able to adapt more easily: "I have been very busy with colleagues in my discipline explaining what I have done and what my plans are (I think I was a bit ahead of others)"; "I would say that I was always more open to the implementation and marriage of technology with learning than other lecturers". This suggests that building digital capability across the institution is important – a new culture within staff teams and supporting students, offering better and more diverse support to sustain this change. This in turn depends on an appropriate balance in teaching workload. This appeared to have been addressed in one of the external institutions:

> Our institution tried to encourage and promote the purpose of the technology as a teaching tool and provide evidence to support any claims. We also had regular open dialogue with all faculty and staff in regard to the technology being used in order to offer additional support and training as needed.

There was also a sense from participants that the technology was robust and reliable, to the point that meetings and other aspects of work would be likely to continue online after the campus reopened: "the main issue was in the social transition of online teaching and the associated feelings of isolation/lack of engagement rather than any issues with the technology itself". Thus, a common thread through the findings mirrors the complexity of digital capacity: the technology and technical skills are important, but communication, collaboration, innovation and pedagogical design are equally important. Analysis of this data suggests that these aspects of digital capacity are more challenging.

In relation to identity, we asked participants how they might describe their own professional practice in the future, and whether they might consider themselves to be digital educators. This term, as an expression of potentially changed identity or an additional identity, was not explicitly discussed within the module and nor was it reflected in the aims of the module. Three of them said that they did, one felt they did not, another that they were "scratching the surface". Some expressed an overall sense of continuing to learn and develop: "I'd like to think that I am someone who continues to evolve", who is "creative". One person expressed a post-digital perspective, saying they would describe themselves as an educator: "the digital is ubiquitous and just a way to facilitate teaching and if we understand teaching, we should be able to teach in different settings and contexts". Another did not previously see themselves as an educator: "I didn't go into teaching, I had two other careers before". This again reflects the context in which people are teaching in a new technological university. One person pointed out that the path to becoming a digital educator was, in their view, a process that requires time, self-reflection and some distance. This last point of view is relevant in the context of this research as it was undertaken in the middle of the emergency. Participants were still dealing with moving online and making fast decisions about what was working, and this impeded reflection about their experiences.

Professional identity encompasses one's relationships around professional activities. Students were appreciative of their lecturers' efforts and were adapting to the change. In relation to colleagues and management teams, participants commented that technology enabled them to share practices, to learn from others and to keep working at full capacity as a team. At the same time, they mentioned some improvements such as better management of meetings than before. Nevertheless, they mentioned that the transition started to be associated with feelings of isolation/lack of engagement. This was a more common experience than any issues with technology itself. The majority (five out of six) of participants felt that their views of technology in their working practices were different from before the campus closure.

Finally, participants were asked whether changes in their teaching practices would be permanent or not. This was of interest to us in examining the context in which they were working, how this context might change post-pandemic, and whether there were any references to the module as an influence on practice. They mentioned that even if the emergency passed, they would keep some practices. These included the use of online assessment rubrics, formative and summative feedback, forums, more engagement with the online feedback systems, self-assessed quizzes online, delivering exams online and using a videoconference tool more regularly both within their teams and with the student body. Thinking ahead to the next 3 years, the participants envisaged increased use of technology and changes to their professional practices with more flipped approaches, and continued evolution. These changes could not be attributed easily to any one factor, complicating our analysis of the influence of the module on participants' identities and practices. We move now to discuss the implications of these findings.

Discussion

It is important to acknowledge that this is a small-scale study generating a snapshot of experience at one moment in time. It is clear from the findings presented in the previous section that we cannot attribute changes in practice around the use of technology by these educators to their participation in the Digital Education module alone. However, a rich set of data exists from a key moment just after the point at which lecturers moved their teaching online and at the same time as they were being encouraged to theorise and reconsider their stance as educators in the digital age through their participation in the Digital Education module. Our analysis suggests that their engagement in this module influenced practice even though this was not the stated aim of the module itself. Additionally, participants could use their experiences as online learners in the module to support their own online teaching, and used the resources shared and discussed in the module as a springboard to other tools and resources they could use in their own teaching. Although we initially planned this research in order to examine the potential influence of the module on identity, and the module as a means of engaging critically and consciously with lecturer identity and digital technologies, the focus of our work shifted with the campus closures to consider how lecturers were navigating the changes in tandem with their experiences on the module. In analysing the data, we have reflected on the timing of our research: it was perhaps naive to expect to see any clear statements about shifts in identity or crystallised reflections on the nature of teaching online with little warning or preparation. There is also clearly a tangled relationship between engagement with the module, and its influence on thinking and practice. However, we suggest that the value of the research is instead in capturing the experiences at that time, in thinking about how any engagement with theory may influence practice and in provoking our own reflections as researchers about educational research post-pandemic. We focus on these themes in this discussion.

Identity

The research demonstrates a sense of isolation amongst practitioners even as technology facilitated ongoing communication with their colleagues and students. Teaching was an isolating experience because of the campus closure, but also because of different levels of experience and attitudes towards technologies:

> I would say that I was always more open to the implementation and marriage of technology with learning than other lecturers but that was mostly down to my comfort level and exposure and previous experience of using technology in the classroom. By the end of the semester, the main issue was in the social transition of online teaching and the associated feelings of isolation/lack of engagement rather than any issues with technology itself.

Some participants knew they had more knowledge and experience using technologies for teaching, learning and assessment than their colleagues. This was notwithstanding the fact that they did not think of themselves as digital educators. This leads us to ask whether we need to think of ourselves as digital educators at all, or whether instead confidence and competence in using digital technologies is a new and growing dimension of being an educator in higher education.

Our findings show that, while participants did not necessarily consider themselves digital educators or in some ways expert with using technology to mediate pedagogical practices, they were able to talk about feelings of greater or lesser confidence in relation to the use of technologies. This was an aspect of practice that they could articulate and discuss, rather than commenting on the nature of technology as difficult or

easy to use or commenting on themselves as being non-expert. This suggests a potential shift in identity as lecturers to include digital, rather than its being external.

An important feature emerging from the data was the sense of isolation amongst practitioners: the immediate isolation from the campus, from their colleagues and students and from close co-lecturers in specific programmes. But isolation was also discussed in relation to different levels of experience as well as attitudes towards technologies. Those who felt comfortable and confident with technology were able to continue their work at a faster pace and with less difficulty than their colleagues. This was isolating on both sides: they felt isolated by knowing what to do and imagined the isolation of others who might be foundering. One person outlined a collaborative effort between colleagues, supported by their institution:

> Technology, much like any tool, is very dependent on how colleagues engage with it. Our institution tried to encourage and promote the purpose of the technology as a teaching tool and provide evidence to support any claims. We also had regular open dialogue with all faculty and staff in regard to the technology being used in order to offer additional support and training as needed.

But another suggested the picture in their institution was mixed and uneven:

> I really don't know. I know that some people are very oriented towards technology in my own school. But then, I sometimes think they're very oriented, and then I find out they're not as oriented as I thought they were.

This is an aspect of the research which warrants further exploration and extension in future work: we suggest that this isolation in relation to digital capacity and confidence already existed while campuses were open, but it was less evident because teaching was conducted face-to-face. It becomes more pronounced, and an obstacle for some, enabler for others, when the campus closes. This has implications for programme teams: first, that teams will have been working remotely and individually for many months, with no obvious end to this in sight. This may have implications for the functioning of programme teams and perhaps even for the identity of individuals within teams. Second, those with well-developed digital capacity and confidence return to the team with this experience and potentially with a very different view of the future. For example, our participants referred to continuing with online assessment and not restoring face-to-face exams, or flipping more lectures online. These decisions have worked for individuals working remotely: how might they be treated within the context of a team discussion face-to-face, when the campus is once more open and choices exist about teaching and assessment formats?

Participants in this research were student-centred and focused on continuing to teach and facilitate learning, but only one articulated a broader view in terms of providing social or quasi-pastoral support to students during the immediate period after the campus closed. Potential shifts in identity arising from working, teaching and assessing remotely, distant from a team in terms of geography and also in terms of how practice has been mediated (successfully or unsuccessfully) will all influence the next phases of practice in the context of a campus-based institution when colleagues have been working away from each other for at least 15 months.

Change

Analysing the dimension of change, based on the results obtained and contrasting them with the theoretical framework for this research, participants were aware of the need to count on an institutional and organisational frame that drives them through the changing process of their teaching. As mentioned above, when lecturers are asked to embrace the potential of technology for their teaching and learning, it is essential to explicitly articulate the institutional assumptions, policies, and procedures that will underpin the foundations of a meaningful sense of change (JISC, 2017). In this sense, lecturers feel more confident to change towards digital education practices, if they receive not only relevant practice training but also a deeper institutional frame to guide and support them throughout the process of pedagogical change.

An additional perspective about managing the change process towards digital educators and institutional practices, is related to leadership. Is the transformative process of building digital capacity a challenge for leaders and lecturers, especially due to the isolation of their team members? In this case, on the one hand,

participants mentioned that the transition started to be associated with feelings of isolation/lack of engagement rather than technical problems. But on the other hand, the resistance to incorporate technologies in practice (Burke, 2011; Schilling et al., 2012) is still present and seen as a medium-term possibility. As a consequence, the kind of leadership needed must balance the process, increasing the sense of community through technology under agility, innovation and collaboration (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020). Finally, the peer dimension influence is a change driver. Research has shown that identity is in flux and socially situated, determined by the contexts in which we find ourselves (Gaither, 2019). Based on this knowledge, we supposed participants would refer to the influence of their peers and colleagues to embrace changes in their working process to become digital educators. But it seems that individual and isolated processes are still the tendency (Ostovar-Namaghi & Sheikhahmadi, 2016), and more instances and initiatives to lead and build up the sense of community are needed, especially because of the possibilities that technology offers to facilitate this transition.

Responses to change

A number of forms of response to change are visible in this research, and these intersect with each other in the data and in our analysis. First, there is the complex nature of the work of educators whose institution has changed to become a new technological university. This new university then experiences a sudden disruption to its educational mission, and the educators working within it have to navigate a pivot to online teaching. As academic developers and researchers, we also experienced the pivot online, and then the complexity of researching and understanding educators' experiences at this time.

Our findings show that educators participating in our module came from a variety of professional backgrounds and described their work in different ways. They were members of programme teams but following the closure of the campus, they also felt somewhat distant from colleagues. This was not because of geographical distance, but because of their digital competence and confidence. This suggests that the new university may in the future have to work with staff in a culture where some have adapted more easily than others to the organisational change, and the experiences of the pandemic.

Through this short project, we have also seen the complexity of undertaking educational research at this time. There are practical difficulties associated with being away from campus, and spaces in which time can be scheduled to meet participants in an interview or focus group setting. Although we were fortunate to have an existing ethical protocol for this work, many colleagues await ethical approval for other research as committees (understandably) have prioritised research projects focused on treatment and prevention of COVID-19 and on urgent societal issues arising from the pandemic. Although participants and researchers alike will always cite time limitations as constraints on their work, these were particularly acute during the early months of the pandemic and are likely to continue to constrain research. Academic developers and educational technologists already struggle to carve out any time in which to research practice and pedagogy in their work (Rapanta et al., 2020), and this has been further eroded by the pressure under which teams are working in order to support their colleagues in the mainstream academic disciplines who are teaching large cohorts of undergraduate and postgraduate students. However, research into teaching and learning practices during and after the pandemic is, we suggest, essential if higher education is to navigate the immediate years afterwards successfully. We suggest that different methodological approaches are needed: we adopted one such approach by providing a recordable format for participants responding to the questionnaire. Multidimensional analysis (Polat, 2020) may be needed to unpick the experiences reported by research participants not only in these early stages of the pandemic, but beyond and over the next number of years. Critical reflection on our research is essential: as researchers, we have discussed the changes in our own perspectives on the pandemic since gathering this data and continue to reflect on the implications of this research for our own practice.

Conclusion

This study aimed to examine potential shifts in lecturers' academic identities as they participated as students in an online Digital Education module, while simultaneously enacting an emergency online pivot in their own teaching practices due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, we aimed to examine how potential shifts in identity may have impacted their sense of agency and action, and in relation to their own digital teaching and learning practices and approaches.

Our findings highlight a number of points worthy of further consideration. Over the past 22 months, higher education has witnessed a radical shift first to predominantly digitally mediated teaching, learning and assessment and then to blended modes (National Forum, 2021). After many years of research and effort to build digital capacity in our universities in order to embed digital into our curricula (Weller, 2020c), this unexpected online pivot was swift and arguably brutal. The long-term impact and implications of this significant change in practice on our students, our staff and our institutions remain to be seen. In light of this, the importance of reflecting on our experiences, and contributing to the scholarship of digital teaching and learning, has arguably never been more important. Yet, as we have discovered, the challenges in the current environment are complex and significant. With "pandemic burnout" widely reported across the sector (Amaya et al., 2020), time and capacity for such research and critical reflection are scarce. Multidimensional analysis may be needed to further examine the experiences of our educators and our students during the pandemic and beyond. But as we have found, in an era of such personal and professional uncertainty, articulating changes to, and visions for, future digital teaching and learning practices is difficult.

Our research has shown that academics' confidence in engaging with digital technologies may have grown during the pandemic so that digital may now be an integral part of their academic identity as opposed to being an external tool to engage with (or not). This offers the potential for institutions to consider more flexible working practices as well as alternative modes of teaching and learning. There is the potential to shift institutional and individual focus to pedagogy rather than the practical issues with accessing and using technology – truly enhancing digital practices. There are potentially very positive changes here at individual, institutional and sectoral levels in terms of pedagogy and practice.

Geographical isolation during extended campus closures appears to have compromised communication and feelings of connectedness or belonging within academic communities, according to participants in this research. It would seem that the necessary focus on resituating academic practices for the online medium may have left little time and energy for nurturing connections with academic peers and communities. Combined with uncertainty around peers' practices – and the possibility of inconsistencies in the student experience as a result – the need for programme-level coordination and collaboration among the academic community becomes even more important.

The need for academic leadership within our institution has been repeatedly hailed as key to the building of digital capacity. In light of our findings, it could be argued that the need for academic leadership in our institutions has never been greater. Our findings indicate a need to strengthen academic communities: in contrast to other research (Sjølie et al., 2020), we found indications that programme team cultures were eroded. Connections between academics were sustained to an extent, but technologies did not nurture "the communitarian character of academic life" (Sjølie et al., 2020, p. 104). Academics felt empowered to develop their own sense of praxis within a digital environment and acted accordingly, but there is a need to develop open collaboration amongst academics. There is a need to develop personal learning networks and support staff to look after their own well-being in an era of personal and professional uncertainty and change (Amaya et al., 2020). There is a need for further research and scholarship to inform and strengthen future practices based on what has worked and what has not worked during this exceptional time.

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Appendix

This appendix lists the complete question set for this research.

- How were you participating in the Digital Education module? [Continuing Professional Development or Master of Education, Science participant]
- To preserve anonymity we are not asking for specific discipline area, but to help us interpret data please let us know your College discipline, campus, or whether you work externally to TU Dublin [drop-down list of options]
- For how long have you been teaching in Higher Education? [drop-down list of timespans]
- What was your motivation for undertaking the Digital Education module?
- How have your teaching and assessment practices changed during the COVID-19 campus closures?
- Aside from the move online, what influenced the changes in your teaching and assessment practices? If you have any additional comments on influences, please add them here.
- Were you happy with the support you received from your University/Organisation in making the transition to remote learning during COVID-19?
- Did the changes you implemented affect how you see yourself as an educator? Please give an example.
- Did your participation in the Digital Education module impact in any way on how you approached the move to remote learning? If so, how?
- How do you think your students perceived your use of technology this semester?
- Thinking about your answer to the previous question, can you comment on whether any change was perceived to be positive or negative by students?
- Reflecting on your experience as an educator during the closure period, do you feel your relationship with your students was affected by the move to remote learning? If so, how?
- What do you consider is the role of technology in building your working relationships with your colleagues and/or management team?
- Would you say you view the role of technology in your working practices (a) differently or (b) in a similar way to your colleagues and/or management team?
- Thinking about your answer to the previous question, can you say whether your view of technology in your working practices is the same as before, or different from before?
- Are there any particular reasons for your answer to the previous question? Can you comment on whether your participation in the Digital Education module has influenced your view?
- At the end of the Digital Education module, we asked participants if they considered themselves to be “digital educators”. What is your response to this question now, two months after the end of the module?
- Looking to the future, what changes to your teaching and assessment practices will you retain beyond the campus closure? Please give an example.
- Thinking about your answer to the previous question, what factors will influence your decision to retain these changes or not?
- Do you think your confidence level in using technology in your teaching and assessment practices has changed during this year? If so, can you give a reason for your answer?
- If you think about your own professional practice in three years’ time, how would you describe yourself as an educator?