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Putting in more: emotional work in adopting online tools in teaching and learning practices.

Abstract

This paper explores the emotional journey associated with changing one's teaching and learning practices and how this constitutes emotional work. The paper analyses the emotions evident in the data from a small scale phenomenological study of lecturers who are using technological tools in their teaching, learning and assessment practices in one higher education institution. The discussion illuminates the nature and scale of the emotional work experienced by some lecturers when changing their teaching and learning practices to incorporate technology. It indicates that this challenge is so extreme that even the most committed advocates of online teaching practices may consider giving up and reverting to traditional ways of teaching. The paper identifies strategies that lecturers use to manage the anxieties they experience in their adoption of online tools.

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Key words; emotional work, technology, innovation, feelings

Introduction

The paper analyses how adopting new technological tools into one's teaching and learning practice affects lecturers in terms of their emotional well-being. Much attention related to technological change focusses on the systemic and institutional aspects (Salmon 2005; Sharpe et al. 2006). Yet this is not the whole story: researchers such as Heath and Heath

(2010) and Pope (2005, 201) have emphasised that change is not just a technical process but requires 'a great deal of emotional energy'. Moreover, Heath and Heath (2010) suggest that without emotional engagement changes will not be sustained.

The specific change I will be examining is the adoption of a group of online tools called Web 2.0 in teaching and learning. The term Web 2.0 encompasses both technologies and services and includes technologies such as a blog or wikis and services such as photo and video sharing sites. The critical defining feature of Web 2.0 tools and services is that they allow participation and collaboration in knowledge building and sharing activities over the web and thus they have the potential for a democratic and participative style of teaching and learning. Crook (2008), CLEX (2009), Conole and Alevizou (2010) and Kirkwood and Price (2013) provide a detailed analysis of the role and challenges for teaching using these tools. Whilst technology is the catalyst for the changes considered here, the paper is not concerned with the technology or the pedagogy associated with its use, but with the emotional work performed by lecturers when they adopt these tools in their teaching. Their story is important because lecturers are critical in relation to making changes in pedagogy (CLEX 2009; Rebbeck and Ecclesfield 2010; Kirkwood and Price 2013) and as Steel (2009) notes lecturers' beliefs are crucial in determining their behaviour.

The paper is organised with a brief introduction to the literature on emotional labour followed by a discussion of the study's methodology and analysis. The findings categorise and analyse positive and negative emotions then apply a framework from Coupland et al. (2008) ('upgrading of emotion', 'self, other and ownership of emotion'). The paper offers some strategies to manage emotions and identifies a theme of 'giving up'.

Emotional labour, emotional work

Emotional work has been explained as "the effort which is required to display that which are perceived to be expected emotions" (Ogbonna and Harris 2004, 1189). Its value in the labour market was conceptualised by Hochschild as emotional labour (1983). One approach to understanding emotions is to see them as an individual psychological constructs, however they can also be viewed as more significantly related to one's social relations; that is as social constructions (1983). Hagenauer and Volet argue that these two approaches are not in conflict and that cognitive appraisals of a situation are "emotion-relevant" but that these appraisals need to be understood as "informed by the social nature of the situation and are not solely processes of the individual as commonly stated in cognitive approaches to

emotions” (2012, 2). This paper adopts this combined approach to the treatment of emotion because it gives weight to both an individual’s agency but also acknowledges the structural dimension and the institutional context that impact on individual’s emotions.

Emotional work makes up a significant aspect of the working lives of teachers in the compulsory sector (Hargreaves 1998; Jenkins and Conley 2007; Day 2008). The working and emotional lives of lecturers in further education has also been studied (Jephcote and Salisbury 2009; Avis et al. 2011). But, as many researchers have noted, little attention has been paid to emotional experiences of lecturers in a higher education (Ogbonna and Harris 2004, Arthur 2009; Koster 2011; Hagenaurer and Volet 2012). However, set in a higher education context Ogbonna and Harris (2004) explored the emotion work participated in by lecturers rising from issues of work intensification and increased surveillance culture. Their research revealed the extent of emotional labour undertaken by lecturers in coping with these demands. Another study of higher education lecturers’ emotional work explored the particular demands associated with teaching subjects that necessitate personal reflection and disclosure such as gender studies (Koster 2011). Koster (2011) argues that emotional work is undervalued and invisible within the higher education institution despite its importance due to the increasing concern for student satisfaction.

The analytical framework used in this paper is taken from Coupland et al. (2008) who studied the language of emotions used by people operating in a range of roles in a further education college. Their framework is used because it focuses on how the organisational context shapes teachers’ emotional lives. Their framework understands emotions not simply as individual psychological constructs but as reflecting and derived from organisational rules surrounding how and what is talked about. An understanding of professional’s emotional lives is a way to illuminate organastional relationships, the ways that individuals manage their professional identity, and how power and resistance are experienced within organisations. They further argue that attending to emotions as ‘socially sustained practices enables us to examine ‘appropriate’ communication rules and the material consequences of these rules’ (Coupland et al. 2008 328). I have applied the emotional rules (‘upgrading of emotion’, ‘self, other and ownership of emotion’ identified in Coupland et al (2008) as a lens to analyse individuals, their personal goals and coping strategies.

Methodology

This paper reports on a study of a group of higher education lecturers at the vanguard of adoption of Web 2.0 tools in their pedagogic practices. This group are categorised by Rogers (1983) as the 'innovators' and 'early adopters' but for the sake of brevity I refer to this group as the 'early adopters' incorporating both categories. The study is set in a case study 'post 1992' university in England institution which sets a particular institutional context for the innovation. The institution's approach to elearning might be characterised as loosely defined in terms of both its strategy and how it is implemented (McNay 1995) in that although it provides a suite of Web 2.0 tools it did not at the time of the study set any expectations that lecturers should use them or monitor or reward those that do so. Thus the adoption of Web 2.0 tools by the participants in the study was of their own choosing and did not derive from an institutional driver.

A purposive sample was constructed to include lecturers with responsibility for delivery of a syllabus and its assessment rather than those who used Web 2.0 for marketing or induction or academic or library skills. Sixteen lecturers were interviewed from a range of the subjects both 'hard' and 'soft'. Lecturers with the longest experience were sought: twelve lecturers had significant experience (6 or more years) whilst the remaining four were trying Web 2.0 tools for the first time. Interviews generally lasted between an hour and ninety minutes and provided opportunity for in depth collegiate discussion: I aimed to build rapport and to position myself as someone who is also engaged in similar teaching and learning developments and understands the challenges. Indeed personal relationships between the researcher and the interviewees enhanced the data collection process (Clegg et al. 2006). One of the limitations of small samples is the degree of external validity or generalisability. However the study sought depth and detail which would not be possible in a larger scale study. As Trowler and Cooper (2002) note practices are highly contextualised so the small scale provided opportunity to explore the complexity of these interrelated factors.

Mechanisms to support reflexive awareness were adopted. These included being aware of my prior assumptions at the start, returning to these regularly and keeping a research diary to record feelings. Whilst there may be a danger that I was looking for particular responses to the interview questions, I approached the interviewing and analysis process in a self-critical way, reviewing my values and beliefs through the process.

BERA's (2011) guidelines were applied and pseudonyms have been used in reporting the data to assure participants' anonymity.

Analysis

Interviews were taped and analysed using both a priori categories and emergent themes. Clegg's (2008) approach to exploring lecturers' conceptions of their identity was to open up dialogue rather than impose her own questions and similarly I took a tangential view of my topic, by focussing on motivations for adoption, the students' and the lecturer's responses to the new activity in order to elicit authentic emotional responses.

The data was treated ideographically in that each respondent was treated as individually significant rather than generalizable and so the findings illuminate aspects of the lives of some of the participants rather than providing a 'blue print' for the experiences of all who participated (Reid, Flowers and Larkin 2005). Indeed there was variation in the emotional component between the participants. However, considering the ability of lecturers to protect their professional identity through their analytical faculties, the presence of emotions in the data is worthy of close examination.

Findings and discussion

A range of positive emotions was evident which included loving their work, enjoyment; delight; feeling revitalised; excitement; pride and confidence. Interestingly there were fewer occurrences of positive compared to negative emotions. This may be a function of the analytical process in that one of the dangers of working with transcribed text is that the emotional content of the data is not easily translated into its written form. It may also be related to the way that academics tended to analyse and rationalise their reflections which may lead to the emotional content being less visible. Positive emotions of enjoyment, pleasure and pride were frequently related to seeing successful outcomes in their students' learning:

I couldn't be more delighted with what they'd achieved. Absolutely amazing standard of work. [Jennifer]

Lecturers' professional identity was evident: their energy and enthusiasm for trying out new approaches in their teaching.

Universally all of the lecturers' stories of adoption showed a strong sense of vision and commitment to their students and to their students' learning echoing the findings of Jephcote and Salisbury (2009) in the FE sector and Haenauer and Volet (2012) in the HE sector.

Negative Feelings and Personal Identity

A range of negative emotions was identified from some lecturers varying from low levels of anxiety on the one hand, to much more heightened emotional content, that of fear, humiliation or anger. These were categorised into three broad groups related to the reasons for the negative emotions: emotions related to the lecturers' personal identity; emotions related to 'carrying the can' for others; and emotions related to working with others.

Lecturers are expected by students to be confident and knowledgeable. Their role is to design and manage the learning environment. Moving to a new technological tool, for some lecturers, was experienced in negative ways. An example of a low degree of negative emotion was anxiety that Sue expresses in the following quote:

I do remember feeling when I taught for the first time entirely online that I was slightly anxious. [Sue]

Likewise Rebecca explores similar sentiments:

I feel a bit out of my depth [Rebecca]

Identifying anxiety as a normal part of the change process is supported by Fullan's work on change in education (1999). Fullan (1999) argues that rather than avoiding anxiety, people who are able to deal effectively with change have learnt to manage their anxiety. He goes on to argue that organisations should find ways to manage or contain anxiety and identifies several strategies used by individuals who cope effectively with anxiety. He argues that organisations need to work towards being 'holding environments' (1999, 77) which contain anxiety.

Fear of being exposed is an emotional response which expresses a stronger level of negative emotion than anxiety and apprehension. Fear of exposure appeared to be related to a belief that lecturers do not have adequate knowledge in relation to the technology:

I think part of my anxiety is that I've only got a very superficial surface learning of how this thing works and as an academic you don't feel confident with that superficial learning and I want a deeper learning of how it all works. [Emily]

Fear of exposure was also experienced as exposure in terms of going into the unknown. For example, when Richard was using a new Web 2.0 synchronous tool he describes teaching in this way as exposing as he would be “put on the spot by the new teaching environment”:

I kind of felt in a sense very ill prepared to do that, even though I'd gone and had a chat with Sue [a more experienced colleague] about it and I didn't really have a chance to prepare in a way that I would have liked to have done. So when I came to do the session it felt a little bit like I was kind of flying without a parachute... There was a kind of nervousness about it. [Richard]

Inadequacy was also evident in one lecturer's response. She talked about feeling that her lack of understanding of technology was “a weakness, a serious weakness” [Emily] in her professional practice. Having a strong sense of one's competence and skills is generally important in order to be a confident practitioner and this feeling of inadequacy illustrates how, for this lecturer, not keeping her skills up to date was undermining her professional identity.

Whilst the feelings of apprehension, anxiety, or fear of exposure were only expressed by a minority of lecturers, these emotions were referred to by several lecturers, suggesting that these emotions are more common than is at first apparent.

I was a bit apprehensive about it because they've never accepted blogging very well... Definitely there was a sense of apprehension. [Sue]

I always feel that my decision to do that [use Web 2.0 tools] adds to my workload and adds to my stress levels. [Richard]

Negative Feelings - 'Carrying the can'

Contrasting with lecturers' feelings about their own skills and roles are feelings which originate from actions outside the lecturers' control. These feelings included embarrassment, frustration, infuriation, fear of a catastrophe, feelings of inadequacy and despair. This range of negative emotion was much stronger and had more significant consequences in terms of students' learning outcomes. It illustrates the vulnerability that lecturers experience in terms of the people and systems on whom they depend.

The reliability of the university's systems is another source of strain for lecturers. At the mildest level this is experienced as embarrassment when the university's systems do not work for some reason and the lecturer is left exposed and having to apologise for errors which are not his (or her) fault:

I was hugely pissed off... that is a huge concern, and I think it is hugely embarrassing when you have to go to students and say, "the licence has elapsed here", because, however much you say, that in all honesty you say this is not my fault here... You are still representing the university and it does look bad. [Richard]

However when it came to consideration of the potential impact on students' assessments, lecturers' reactions were more extreme. They displayed despair, frustration, exposure, isolation and feelings of catastrophe. Generally these feelings were not in response to an event that had even occurred but an anticipation of how vulnerable lecturers feel to using technological systems within assessed work:

I keep thinking that I'm going to click on Blackboard and all the assessments are going to have disappeared and I'm going to have to say aghh. [Emily]

It would be a disaster, an unmitigated disaster, if we'd done all this work and set it up and encouraged students to engage with it, and then all of a sudden it...just got withdrawn. [Sue]

Negative Feelings - Normative discourse

A final category of negative feelings concerned how tutors relate to their colleagues. Most commonly lecturers discussed relationships with colleagues as supportive, however, there were a couple of lecturers who felt emotionally challenged by colleagues. One lecturer perceived the response of colleagues, at times, to be dismissive and disparaging. Another lecturer articulated a very strong sense of being humiliated and laughed at by colleagues and talked about the work being an emotional battle:

My colleagues love to see me with egg on my face, they really do they love it when it all falls apart and they can laugh at me and they think it is hysterical when technology fails... It is absolutely a hoot. I feel like I'm on the lunatic fringe. I feel that people are laughing at me because of what I do... It is work hard - emotional work... They laugh at me. Which is really annoying and it is humiliating. I hate that feeling of burning humiliation and they love it. [Claudia]

Here Claudia identifies the struggle that she has to contend with as she takes on new ways of working that go outside of the norms of her department's approach to teaching and learning. This is 'emotional work': she articulates feeling despondent and challenged to the point that she thinks about abandoning her approach and going back to using the VLE in a more conventional way. Similarly Catherine experiences her work using Web 2.0 tools as an invitation for ridicule from colleagues:

Most are quite disparaging about actually and dismissive "oh bloody tweeting what's the point of that it is just nonsense..." They are very conservative. They want to retain the old ways of working. [Catherine]

Several lecturers used the metaphor of 'a battle' when discussing their work with others. The notion of fighting or battling was sometimes used in relation to colleagues with whom they were working closely to jointly deliver a programme and sometimes, more generally, in relation to the dominate discourse in a lecturer's department:

I get the courage to stand up against them and fight back against it... I'll do if in a formative context and that will add to weight to the fight. [Emily]

I'm sticking my head above a parapet so it has to get knocked off occasionally. [Claudia]

The metaphor of 'fight', either with individuals or with a general culture, conjures up notions of people on two sides, for and against, a new way of working. It suggests the strength of the opposition that lecturers in my study feel when making changes and the personal challenge in pursuing these changes.

The power of the dominant ways of operating to constrain innovation and to shape practice is seen in Emily's views below. In this example she is arguing that she would be willing to use a new social media tool if it was considered normal practice within the department:

if there was a culture of us within the university all having a Facebook page for our own courses and I'd been indoctrinated into that culture, probably I'd have gone along with it, but it isn't something that I would necessary at the moment choose to do. [Emily]

Normative discourse is described by Ellis (2010, np) as "a way of thinking and talking about something whereby it is understood to be true that something is normal": They are the cultural norms that pervade an institution. The experiences of some of the lecturers in my study demonstrate the power of these norms to constrain and challenge those who seek to work in a different way with their students. Catherine's colleagues have a disparaging attitude to technology whilst Claudia's experiences being laughed at. These experiences are significant and personally painful. They are likely to constrain innovation because other lecturers are unlikely to adopt a new approach if they see it as marginal. As Ertmer (2005, 36) argues cultural norms, the "familiar images of what is proper and possible in classroom settings", guide teachers' practices rather than instructional theories.

This paper provides evidence of the importance of recognising the power of normative discourse and the personal challenge that is involved in working against cultural norms. Whilst making use of new technological tools holds some particular technical challenges, as discussed above, it also has a cultural dimension unrelated to the technological nature of the tools, and these may be significant inhibitors for those who do not wish to challenge dominate practices.

Upgrading and downgrading of emotion

Coupland et al. (2008, 336) identify upgrading of emotion whereby emotion is emphasised and is constructed as “very close to the speaker with colourful language and powerful expressions of feeling.” It is notable, in the quotes given earlier in this paper, that upgrading of emotion is much more evident when talking about their feelings in relation to ‘carrying the can’ for others compared to feelings related to their own personal skills and knowledge:

It would be a disaster, an unmitigated disaster. [Sue]

I was hugely pissed off... that is a huge concern, and I think it is hugely embarrassing. [Richard]

In contrast, lecturers are more measured, or downgrade, emotions related to their own skills and expertise. They demonstrated confidence, reflective and analytical skills and problem solving approach to challenges that are within their own control. The challenges discussed here are the practices of online tutoring brought about by use of Web 2.0 tools. In each example the tutor has developed an understanding of the medium they are using and the skills and or practices they need to work in this new medium:

It [use of Web 2.0 tools] will also introduce problems as well, potentially such as people going off into topics that you think are completely irrelevant or perhaps behaving in a way that targets individuals personally... I don't see it as a reason not to engage with Web 2 technologies. I see it as a reason to develop protocols or ways of managing [Richard]

When you're working online whether it be sort of quick response, or a longer one, I think you need to be quite precise in what you say so that they don't misunderstand it. So I think you've got to be a bit clearer about your language [Rachel]

What I was trying to do was get them to reflect more deeply on their own learning which meant that I didn't have to think about how far they had understood and explain something to them [Sue]

In each of these examples the lecturers present reflective and thoughtful discussion of details of what they do when teaching online. For Richard, the need to find ways to manage students in online activities so they get the most from the activity; for Rachel, a sensitivity to the textual format of the teaching interactions; and for Sue, an understanding of the aims and focus for her online teaching to develop students' ability to reflect on their learning.

It appears that the emotional work required to cope with challenges external to their control is more extensive than those to cope with things under their control. Whilst this is not surprising, this analysis makes evident the extent of this challenge which was experienced by some as a significant burden.

Self, other and ownership of emotion

Coupland et al. (2008) describe the term mitigation as a process by which people make claim to negative emotions but do so in ways that protect their professional identity. One example of the way in which people mitigate negative emotions is through the construction of distance or proximity between the speaker and the emotion being described (Coupland et al. 2008). In my study there was evidence of lecturers constructing distance through their use of the second person. Typically when they talked about emotion they used the first person but talked in the second person when things went wrong or were difficult:

when I've felt frustrated and it does all feel like a lot of hard work and **you** don't really know why **you** took it on. [Claire]

There was a kind of nervousness about it and it is also the case of accepting that and even admitting it to students you know "this is the first time I've done this"... and I think if **you** do that it can allay your kind of nerves about it... I think it is hugely embarrassing when **you** have to go to students and say "the licence has elapsed."
[Richard]

What Harré (1986) describes as "the local moral order" is evident through the way that these expressions of emotion are constructed. Coupland et al. (2008, 340) agree arguing that through analysing different uses of vocabularies associated with accounts of emotional experiences at work these local moral orders are made visible. In particular, it appears that Richard is vulnerable to criticism from his students. He takes the blame for what is not his fault whilst maintaining his professional identity with his students. This may explain why emotions related to 'carrying the can for others' are expressed so strongly in that they express a sense that lecturers consider what they are experiencing to be morally wrong.

Strategies to manage emotions

The early adopters used a range of strategies to manage the emotional aspects of the adoption of technology enhanced learning. Lecturers managed negative feelings associated with their own skills and knowledge in a variety of ways. Some lecturers reported ensuring that they were highly prepared. This included having a complete understanding of the topic, a good grasp of the technology and how it will work in practice. Whilst other lecturers worked through their feelings of discomfort by acknowledging that this is how change feels:

I sort of forced myself... because I thought if students are going to do it then I'm going to have to learn. [Emily]

Another lecturer discussed making students aware of the situation and encouraging them to see this as a shared journey into unknown territory:

even admitting it to students you know “this is the first time I’ve done this” or “this is a bit of an experiment let’s see how it goes” and I think if you do that it can allay your kind of nerves about it and it can also allay some of the students’ nerves about it as they may not have much experience. [Richard]

One lecturer pointed out that all teaching involves undertaking an endeavour with students that may not go according to one’s plans. Hence there is inherent risk in all teaching whether it be with or without technology, involving a new strategy or repeating a familiar lesson plan. This ability to analyse, rationalise and manage the uncertainties of leading a teaching session is a routine part of the lecturer’s repertoire and is another strategy by which the early adopters managed their feelings of anxiety.

Positive emotions associated with making changes provided another way of balancing risk with benefits. Indeed some lecturers experienced making changes as revitalising. As Fullan (1999) argues creativity and anxiety go hand in hand and Jennifer’s quote reveals that some lecturers harness feelings of anxiety and vulnerability to energise their practices by using new approach to teaching and learning.

Giving up

As the burden of taking on new practices carried a heavy emotional cost for some lecturers, the notion of ‘giving up’ was evident in the data. This notion was apparent in three situations. First in situations where colleagues ‘carried the can’ for the limitations in the university systems. They reported avoiding using certain tools and some reported thinking about giving up on their use.

The Grademark tool just seems to be unreliable. When it works it’s great but sometimes it doesn’t and so you’re left in this position – do I want to use it so that get those benefits and accept that sometimes it goes wrong. **Or do we scrap it** and go back to marking in word and emailing through - which we know will work. [Catherine]

Likewise in the discussion of challenging the normative discourses within the institution, Claudia illustrates how close she comes to ‘giving up’ using innovative practices and instead thinks about reverting to the traditional pattern of lecturing:

And sometimes when I get tired and I get fed up **I just feel like saying “oh fuck it. I’ll go and lecture each week.”** You know I’ll upload my PowerPoints to Blackboard and I’ll give them a one hour lecture... Sometimes it just feels too hard. [Claudia]

Earlier in the paper the emotional journey associated with challenging normative discourses was discussed. Lecturers experienced humiliation, of being reduced to tears, of being treated in a disparaging way. This sort of conflict in one's working environment indicates a high emotional burden for lecturers to endure and one that is likely to dissuade the casual user against the uptake of the tool.

The final group for whom giving up was evident was those new to the uptake of the tools. Emily's adoption of the technology is much less assured than other more experienced users. Throughout the interview she discusses her lack of knowledge of the tools and her understanding of the technology which she is using. Her lack of commitment is reflected in her ambivalence:

I do think if the blog hadn't gone as smoothly as it had of done, **I probably would have dumped it**. If we had had a catalogue of errors, if the students had been protesting, if it just hadn't worked it would not have been worth the hassle. I don't know if it is worth the hassle to be honest. [Emily]

Conclusions

The paper reports on the emotional work that higher education lecturers engage in when they make use of Web 2.0 tools in their teaching and learning practices. The study is small scale in relation to the numbers of participants drawn from a single institution so further research is needed to establish the generalisability of the findings and to consider the extent to which the institutional context shapes the emotional journey of lecturers adopting Web 2.0 tools in their teaching and learning practices.

There were examples of positive emotions that lecturers experienced when using technology with students: it was energising and motivating because it involved trying out new ideas and working with students in new ways and all lecturers evidenced commitment to improving their students' learning which drove the rationale for changing their practices. However some lecturers also experienced using technology as emotionally challenging, in part due to the technological nature of the tools being unfamiliar but also because lecturers face students and thus 'carrying the can' for any failing in the university's technological systems. The emotional challenges were not solely related to the technological nature per se, they also derived from being at the vanguard of a new pedagogical approach and working in a different way to the institutional norms and it was clear that for some this added to their emotional burden.

The lecturers in this study had a range of strategies for managing their emotions: some put more time into preparation, others acknowledged the challenge and 'worked through it', whilst others tried to build with their students, a sense of shared journey into the 'new world' brought about by technology.

The paper concludes that it appears that many lecturers are putting in more, both emotionally and practically, to try to deliver quality learning experiences as a result of their use of technology. Indeed the emotional journey is powerful in its ability to drain and challenge some practitioners. And for some, including some of the most committed and confident practitioners, the emotional work was so considerable that it gave rise to feelings of wanting to give up. It appears that there is for some, a high emotional cost involved in making use of technology within one's pedagogical practice.

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