Continuous Professional Development in a Micro Learning Format and Lecturer Identities

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Abstract

Situated in the context of prolific continuous professional development interventions across international higher education, this paper reports on digital micro learning and lecturer identities. While digital micro learning has been heralded as offering a nonintrusive, granular and engaging approach to continuing professional development, there is a paucity of qualitative studies in this domain. Seeking to bridge this gap, semi-structured, visual elicitation interviews with lecturers in a United Arab Emirates’ college and a document analysis yielded a rich description of the situated learning experiences of the participants. Applying a socio-cultural identity lens, the thematic analysis revealed the avenues for identity reification and the barriers which trigger marginalised identities. Course accessibility advantages, small batch learning and meaningful reflexive opportunities were drivers to engagement, learning and imagining future professional selves. Meanwhile, impediments to digital micro learning which constrained identity negotiation were forced compliance with mandatory courses and perfunctory, ineffective digital peer collaboration.
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Abstract

Situated in the context of prolific continuous professional development interventions across international higher education, this paper reports on digital micro learning and lecturer identities. While digital micro learning has been heralded as offering a nonintrusive, granular and engaging approach to continuing professional development, there is a paucity of qualitative studies in this domain. Seeking to bridge this gap, semi-structured, visual elicitation interviews with lecturers in a United Arab Emirates’ college and a document analysis yielded a rich description of the situated learning experiences of the participants. Applying a socio-cultural identity lens, the thematic analysis revealed the avenues for identity reification and the barriers which trigger marginalised identities. Course accessibility advantages, small batch learning and meaningful reflexive opportunities were drivers to engagement, learning and imagining future professional selves. Meanwhile, impediments to digital micro learning which constrained identity negotiation were forced compliance with mandatory courses and perfunctory, ineffective digital peer collaboration.

Key words: continuous professional development, micro learning, higher education, identity

Introduction

Digital micro learning (DML) is a relatively new approach to continuous professional development (CPD) in higher education contexts (Jomah et al., 2016). This paper presents findings from a larger qualitative study in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which sought to examine the relationship between DML and lecturer identities, mobilising Wenger’s (1998) seminal framework of identity-in-practice (IiP). Following a thematic analysis on interview transcripts and documents, the research revealed that while some design aspects of DML interventions contributed to the positive reification of lecturer identities, there were other DML factors which restricted learner engagement and marginalised identities.

Continuous professional development and digital micro learning

The pursuance of professionalism by those working in higher education is often associated with them actively seeking out advanced knowledge and skills to connect, engage and legitimise their professional regime of competence (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). This critical aspect of lecturer identity formation is linked to a commitment to lifelong learning which is often
operationalised through extensive involvement in CPD activities (Armour & Makopoulou, 2012). Alongside this, institutional CPD offerings, such as workshops and courses, have been increasingly introduced in higher education in response to the performativity agenda, accountability demands and evolving forms of digital edtech which require substantial training (Bamber & Stefani, 2016).

Digital CPD is also becoming more pervasive as it may harmonise educators’ learning with their busy occupational schedules and personal commitments. (Vu et al., 2014). The flexibility of digital learning was foregrounded even further due to the disruptions precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic when face to face courses were inaccessible. Digital CPD is now often leveraged to create bounded online spaces in which professional learners can participate in pedagogical discourse with peers, engage in deep reflective practice and enjoy the freedom of self-directed learning (Signer, 2008). While there is much academic discourse relating to the value of social interaction and online learning communities, there is a paucity of evidence relating to concrete principles that might achieve substantive learning (Teräs, 2016). Moreover, digital CPD learners have reported challenges spanning excessive course demands, technological difficulties, absence of motivation and inadequate support (Shamir-Inbal & Blau, 2020).

In contrast, DML interventions might be more effective since they offer opportunities to increase lecturer-as-learner commitment through absorbable, memorable small chunks of content (Shamir-Inbal & Blau, 2020) with assignments accomplished at the learner’s own pace, raising autonomy and allowing the management of one’s own knowledge acquisition (Wynants & Dennis, 2018). However, the efficacy of this digital form of instruction is dependent on the organisation’s willingness and ability to proffer applicable learning trajectories, clarify the relevance of learning outcomes and provide dedicated faculty support (Coakley et al., 2017). Furthermore, to achieve micro learning objectives, digital course sites should permit accessible and ongoing interactions between specialists and participants, encourage critical thinking, employ andragogical precepts and invoke curiosity (Shamir-Inbal & Blau, 2020). At the research site, both mandatory and elective micro courses form part of distinct learning pathways and are two hours in length. One hour is devoted to online instructional time, and the remaining hour used for reflective posts and discussion fora interactions,
which involve commenting constructively on at least two colleagues’ reflective posts. Some examples are shown in Table 1, below.

**Table 1**

*Learning pathways and example courses*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DML learning pathway</th>
<th>Example courses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Technology for teaching</em></td>
<td>Introduction to Nearpod</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Planning with the TPACK framework</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Instructional principles</em></td>
<td>Bloom’s taxonomy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Instructional design tips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The learning management system</em></td>
<td>Creating an assignment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Using rubrics effectively</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Identity-in-practice**

Through a social-cultural lens, identities are not characterised as fixed and stable, but rather they are dynamic and in flux (Howard, 2021). For Wenger (1998, p. 151), identity work takes place through practice ‘in the constant work of negotiating the self’. Wenger’s (1998) work examined this phenomenon at length, resulting in his advancement of the triadic model of IiP which is experienced through engagement, alignment and imagination. Firstly, engagement is reflected in the social actor’s personal investment in tasks and activities as they work with others in enterprises and negotiate meaning. This aspect of IiP helps to build up contextualised images of the self (Trent, 2011).

Additionally, alignment pertains to how individuals consolidate their awareness of their practice into the wider domain of coordinating and collaborating with others (Wenger, 1998). Lastly, while ‘extrapolating beyond our own experience’ (Trent, 2011, p. 615) we may envision future and past trajectories, which is viewed by Wenger as the third tenet of IiP: imagination. Thus, the capacity for imaginative work corresponds with how actors can conceive images of the self, which are extraneous to the immediate social practices in which they are engaged (Wenger, 1998). In the current, high pressured climate of higher education, and the increasing CPD demands exerted on academics, it is conceivable that ongoing interventions might yield opportunities and embed constraints in the negotiation of lecturers’ learner and professional identities (Webster-Wright, 2009). As the literature regarding lecturers’ enactments of DML is noticeably sparse, it was anticipated that this study could
yield insight into the relationship between DML and lecturer identities. The research question framing this study is: *How do lecturers negotiate identities-in-practice as they engage in DML?*

**Research design**

This was a small-scale localised study conducted at a federal college in the UAE. Guided by the constructivist paradigm (Howard, 2022a; 2022b), I adopted a hermeneutic lens to interpret the lecturers’ lived reality by ‘grasping the relevant features’ of the interventions and interpreting their influences (Schwandt, 2005, p. 98).

**Participants**

Using a purposive strategy, I targeted lecturers from varied academic divisions to ameliorate potential bias (Abma, 2006). Five participant transcripts were used in this paper, although the original study reported on the accounts of twelve interviewees (Howard, 2021). The lecturers work in the English, Computer Science, General Education, Mathematics and Applied Media divisions. In the interests of privacy and due to the protectionist nature of the cultural context, all identifying information regarding the participants has been withheld (Howard, 2020).

**Semi-structured visual elicitation interviews**

Collecting self-report data respects lecturers’ professional identities and in-depth interviews are useful in giving voice to lecturers to gain a rich responsive understanding, or *verstehen*, of their learning experiences (Howard, 2019). As this study was conducted at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, remote interviews took place on Zoom. I opted to use semi-structured interviews for their flexibility and incorporated an authentic text visual elicitation technique - displaying the participants’ CPD transcripts and course descriptions to promote discussion and reflection (Pauwels, 2020).

**Documents**

The participants kindly agreed to share their CPD transcripts and discussion-board posts. These documents were instructive in understanding the range and number of micro-courses they had completed and evidenced the types of reflective practice they engaged in following the instructional
hour of each course. Furthermore, it was possible to see how collaboration with others in the discussion fora unfolded.

**Analysis**

I utilised Braun and Clarke’s (2012) thematic analysis approach to present rich depictions of the lecturers’ perspectives and experiences (Aronson, 1995). To begin, I uploaded the transcripts into Atlas.ti 8. I read each transcript multiple times to engage with the data, whilst writing descriptive memos and pondering initial ideas for codes (Wynants & Dennis, 2018). Next, I started to apply analytical codes by searching for patterns both in the data and from the literature previously reviewed (Wynants & Dennis, 2018). The finalised codes were arranged into themes, which was supported by the analytical tools offered by Atlas.ti 8, to ‘reflect and describe a coherent and meaningful pattern in the data’ (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 63). This paper will present two themes.

**Ethics**

Ethical approval was conferred from both Lancaster University and the participating college. The lecturers were provided with a detailed information sheet and signed a consent form. I selected Zoom as it offers secure recording and storage capabilities that do not necessitate access to third-party software (Archibald et al., 2019).

**Findings and discussion**

In the exposition of findings below, participant’s quotations are embedded in an interpretive account grounded in the relevant identity and CPD literature.

**Reification of identities**

Opportunities for robust lecturer-as-professional learner identities were facilitated by the features of the DML interventions including digital delivery, short course format and the opportunities for extensive reflection permitted through the posts that were required for completion of each micro-course.
The structure of the courses really suits me because it gives enough context to learn something new and doesn’t take long to complete. It is preferable to me sitting in a room and having to listen to a presentation. It feels more like I am in control of the pace, and I can find a quiet time to do the assignment which suits me too. (Lecturer E)

Having this amount of control makes me want to learn and engage. (Lecturer A)

Through the anytime, anywhere access to learning content, as described above, the lecturers were highly motivated to participate in micro learning. The analysis revealed that by utilising andragogical principles of flexibility in course design (Webster-Wright, 2009) lecturers were well positioned to leverage self-regulated approaches to their CPD. Rather than attend in-person sessions, which were seen as an onerous burden on the participants, the ability to study according to personal preferences aligned with their occupational lives and was a driver to their engagement. With DML appearing to mesh with individual development affinities (Noonan, 2018), this may add to the ongoing reification of a lifelong learning identity (Coffield et al., 2004).

In addition, micro learning content has been suggested to conform to optimal forms of information processing (Jomah et al., 2016), since new knowledge is received in manageable portions, which, for most lecturers aided their retention of information. Lecturer B’s fragment below, summarises this sub-text and reflects the views of several other participants:

The courses provide succinct nuggets of knowledge building which is much more in line with how academic life is nowadays. Everyone is so busy and long courses would be an added stress. This form of learning delivers a manageable amount of information and because of that, it is definitely easier to remember and apply.

The reflective assignments which formed half of the course requirements were cited as highly beneficial by several participants. Since reflective practice involves contemplating learning with ‘new eyes’ (Wenger, 1998, p. 272) and reinterpreting past and future experiences, the assignments prompted lecturers to consciously analyse their praxis in a valued space. Within this digital space, they could imagine themselves, their idealised practice and desired results with learners. Moreover,
they could experience identification with their professionalism, beyond engagement, as their knowledge was augmented (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). This was evidenced in the posts analysed, supported by the lecturers’ narratives, for example:

*I've been in this profession for 24 years, and I sometimes feel like I am stuck in a rut [...] like being an experienced driver yet picking up those bad habits through the years. Devoting time and space to really reflect on what I am doing and will do in the future really helps me to address that and apply my learning in practice.* (Lecturer C)

Meaningful reflection thus permitted the lecturers-as-learners to activate schemata and associate this with identifiable issues in their praxis. This presented the opportunity for faculty to challenge extant beliefs and assumptions (Rizzuto, 2017), and in turn, prompted self-exploration and negotiation as the lecturers aligned their professional identities with their learner selves (Trent, 2011). Moreover, this demonstrates how through the imaginative facet of identity negotiation, the lecturers could shape future frames of themselves which assisted in ‘the formation of emergent identities as increasingly effective, developing practitioners’ (Howard, 2021, p. 7).

**Marginalisation of identities**

Notwithstanding the avenues for the reification of identities as described above, there were also two salient barriers to DML acceptance, evidenced in the collaborative aspect of the reflective assignments, in which lecturers were required to engage with other course participants in the fora. Additionally, when there was incongruency between the institution’s mandated courses and the lecturers’ perceived expertise, this caused tension and acted as a barrier to learning and engagement.

Whilst research suggests that online collaboration can extrinsically motivate learners to be socially present and active in constructive discussion (Howard, 2023; deNoyelles et al., 2014), the lecturers’ accounts largely negated this perspective. Peer feedback was repeatedly characterised as superficial and apathetic: *There’s really no point, as nobody takes it seriously or even appears to read the post they’re commenting on* (Lecturer D). Most lecturers desired authentic discussion with their peers and could imagine its potential affordances, yet they were resolutely disappointed with the outcome in
practice: The [forums] should be really helpful because you get to learn and implement others’ ideas, but nobody does it properly (Lecturer A). Thus, the actualised online interactions fall short of the objective of online collaboration, create an ambivalent attitude and thus fail to promote productive shared identities of colleagues who are mutually committed to the DML process (Kreijins et al., 2014).

Secondly, the discord between institutional CPD directives, existing knowledge and course content led to a dissonance, in which learner identities could not be accommodated or aligned (Wenger, 2010). Frustration was invoked when lecturers felt compelled to trudge through recycled content (McChesney & Aldridge, 2018), especially in the predominantly theoretical courses (e.g., Bloom’s Taxonomy). As lecturers-as-learners are thought to shape their identities partially through their learning journeys, identity alignment is restrained when specific knowledge has been previously acquired, sedimented and is incompatible with some DML interventions (Wenger, 1998):

*The college should understand that some people already know the content. If you’re coming from an education background, you have studied this stuff already. It might be novel to someone coming directly from industry, but not for others. We shouldn’t all be lumped together as that is bordering on insulting.* (Lecturer C)

The preceding excerpt revealed how identities can be discredited when expertise is overlooked (Wenger, 1998). This lecturer (and others) viewed this positioning by the institution as unwarranted and it directly contravened their imagined self as a knowledgeable professional, given their subject discipline. The compulsory, yet redundant course content, regardless of its duration, is indicated as an affront to one’s professional identity and aligning oneself with colleagues who lack the same competence and knowledge is untenable.

**Conclusion**

Learner and professional identities appear likely to undergo reification when lectures are afforded the opportunity to learn where and when is most conducive for them, when knowledge is delivered in digestible chunks and when extensive reflection is encouraged. On the other hand, marginalised,
fragile identities may emerge when an individual’s expertise is denied and redundancy in learning is unavoidable. DML CPD specialists and the broader stakeholders may benefit from regularly surveying course participants to raise awareness of the ambivalent reality of online collaboration. Acknowledging lecturers’ histories and regimes of learning by embedding customised development trajectories are suggestions which could encourage lecturers to fully engage with DML, align their newly acquired knowledge with institutional goals and promote a sense of belonging and identity commitment to DML interventions (Wenger, 1998). As DML is a relatively new approach, future research could examine additional intervention features in different geographical contexts to further our understanding of this relative terra incognita.

References


