Autoethnography, digitalisation and professional identity

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Introduction

▶ Careers Adviser at Cardiff University, graduated from MA in Career Development and Management at Coventry University in September 2021

▶ Research project for MA dissertation

▶ Interested in professional identity (transition from student-graduate and in job role) and also reflecting on the impact on this of working completely remotely for most of the pandemic

▶ Presentation will cover the:

   ▶ Background and context

   ▶ Research method and approach

   ▶ Findings and discussion

   ▶ Reflection and impact

The research question, aims and scope

▶ *How has digitalisation impacted on my professional identity, as a trainee career practitioner within higher education?*

▶ Focused on UK context

▶ 'Trainee' career practitioner – recognised that I was undertaking professional postgraduate qualification and was relatively new to profession

▶ Higher education – not all career settings would be the same

▶ Due to method adopted, research is not generalisable – it can only speak to MY professional identity

▶ Bringing together interest in both professional identity and digitalisation

Background and context: professional identity

- Reflecting more and more on how the radical digital changes to my daily role during the pandemic could impact on my **professional identity**

- **Literature review –** complex but fascinating! Especially as a recently qualified practitioner with experience in one careers setting

  - Do we have a shared identity?

  - Structure and agency and the impact of political or social changes on professional identity – Connexions service a good example (Artaraz, 2006)

  - Focused on work of Gough (2017) and Thambar (2016) (also Thambar et al. 2021) for the literature review

- **Professional identity an "important facet in times of change and transition" (Neary, 2011: 40)**

Background and context: digitalisation

- Pre-pandemic digitalisation already important within career development profession e.g.

  - CDI's 2017 Digital Strategy for the Career Development Sector – mission to 'embed digital literacy in every aspect of the work of career development practitioners'

  - Research exploring the growth of digital technologies in career development profession and the skill-set required of practitioners e.g. Bimrose et al's summary of the use of digital tools in careers provision: as a 'resource,' 'medium for communication' and 'for the development of materials' (2015: 9)

- Huge increase in digitalisation of everyday working practices due to Covid 19 and remote working

- Noticed a lack of research that explored career practitioner's **own views** of the digital tools they were using and **how this impacted on them professionally**

The research approach and methodology

▶ **Postmodernism** - knowledge cannot be separated from the social context

▶ **Interpretive phenomenology -** to understand a specific event, time or place (phenomenon) by uncovering "common taken-for-granted meanings, habits, rituals, practices and everyday life"

▶ Both approaches:

  ▶ Question what we can know and what valid knowledge is

  ▶ Emphasise the importance of wider social context

  ▶ Lead to a more qualitative research approach – the rich data gained from individual perspectives

Autoethnography

▶ **The research*er* is also the research *subject***

▶ **"offers a way of giving voice to personal experience to advance sociological understanding" (Wall, 2008: 39)**

▶ Controversial research method

> ▶ Debate about its validity (but goes back to research approach)

> ▶ Personal! *"the ever-present voice that says isn't this just self-indulgent nonsense?"* (Muncey, 2010: 86)

▶ Ethical approval sought from university

▶ Well suited to career practitioners' existing skill-set e.g. reflection, reflexivity and self-awareness

▶ Not generalisable

Data collection and analysis

▶ Data consisted of "memories of my lived experience" (Wall, 2008: 45) spent working digitally during the pandemic and also findings from a structured, reflective diary which was competed at four intervals between June and July 2021

 ▶ "self-observational data" (Chang, 2008: 90) – allowed me to capture my thoughts, feelings and observations

▶ Data analysed thematically and 3 key areas relating to digitalisation and professional identity identified:

 ▶ **Importance of continuing professional development (CPD)**

 ▶ **Networking and professional profile**

 ▶ **Confidence**

Findings

CPD	Networking and professional profile	Confidence
• **Increased availability** of CPD opportunities due to digitalisation was a strong theme • **Able to participate in more and more conveniently** • However **choice overwhelming, not all a good use of my time and CPD was more likely to be 'shoehorned'** into the working day – *"if I had gone to the conference physically, my full attention would have been on this…"*	• Increased digitalisation **enabled me to think more about growing my network** and utilising LinkedIn – *"I don't think I ever gave myself the time to sit down and really focus on developing a profile and familiarising myself with the platform…"* • Gough highlights importance of shared "community of practice" in career practitioner's professional identity – **digitalisation didn't necessarily make it easier to network** and I regretted not having the confidence to use the networking feature on an online conference	• Familiarity with digital tools and new digital skills developed my confidence in my own ability (e.g. delivering large lecturers online felt more comfortable) and also in helping others develop their digital literacy • However digital failures impacted on my confidence, even when factors were out of my control (e.g. WI-FI)

Discussion and reflection

► Digitalisation interacts with key elements of my professional identity and is **connected both to my confidence and (perceived) competence**

► **Access to huge volumes of easily and readily available online CPD opportunities can be overwhelming** – future research needed (Yates, 2014; Bimrose and Brown, 2019)

► **Depth of interest in professional identity**, connected to my PG qualification – "undertaking appropriate initial qualifications and subsequent CPD is an essential factor in becoming and remaining a consciously competent professional practitioner" (Allan and Moffat, 2016: 452)

► Utilised a method that could be useful for practitioner researchers as it requires the "reflective stance" (Gough, 2017: 193)

► Would have liked to focus more on the 'ethnography' side of autoethnography and bring in other perspectives (including fellow practitioners and other key stakeholders) too

Personal and professional impact

- **Personal impact**
  - Developed research skills and knowledge about a new research method
  - Refined skills needed for both research and as a career practitioner i.e. self-awareness, reflection, better understanding of professional identity and being able to advocate for the profession
  - Possible future research - particularly interested in continuing professional development, how digitalisation has impacted on this and how career practitioners in all sectors choose to engage with this

- **Professional impact**
  - Submitted a proposal for and was shortlisted for the Bill Law Award 2022
  - Joined the AGCAS Phoenix Editorial Group as a voluntary member to stay on top of research and developments in the field

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