Life-on-campus or my-own-time-and-screen: Identity and agency in online postgraduate study

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Background Online postgraduate coursework students are a growing cohort and are at significant risk of attrition. While it is theorised that identity strongly shapes trajectories of learning, there has been little research on online postgraduate students’ identity construction. Holland et al. (1998) proposes that people agentically ‘author’ themselves in and around ‘figured worlds’ or collective social imaginaries. This study seeks to explore how postgraduate coursework students describe what it means to be an online student, by charting how they navigate the figured worlds associated with their study.

Context This research was conducted in the context of a single Australian university. Participants were postgraduate students, who were enrolled in a program employing a centralised learning design across a range of postgraduate certificates, diplomas or masters degrees.

Methods We conducted 14 interviews with participants, plus four contributed longitudinal audio diaries (weekly audio reflections on their experiences). Analysis involved inductive coding and interpretation using sensitising lenses from figured worlds theory.

Findings The life-on-campus figured world projected a “traditional” student who has an on-campus experience, replete with lecturers, textbooks, cafes and classrooms. Alternatively, my-own-time-and-screen figured world projected a technologically-enabled student whose world is mediated by software, their own spaces and a sense of self-sufficiency. This was often constructed relative to the life-on-campus figured world; while students tended to describe themselves within both figured worlds, they did so with reference to the other. Interpersonal interaction was described differently in each figured world. In the life-on-campus world, students bounce ideas off each other and have dynamic social relationships. In the my-own-time-and-space world, agentic students reach out to each other by sharing information. The participants’ accounts describe the fractured and sometimes contradictory nature of authoring themselves through and within both of these figured worlds.

Implications The social and relational imperative associated with inhabiting lectures and cafes in the life-on-campus figured world appeared to have no online equivalent, while the predominance of self-sufficiency was startling in the my-screen-and-time figured world. Understanding the relationship between interpersonal interaction and identity construction may provide important insights into how we promote learning and assist online postgraduate students in completing their studies. Understanding these multiplicities will be critical to designing new hybrid modes of learning as higher education increasingly moves online.