

Navigating Blended Learning, Negotiating Professional Identities

Natalie-Jane Howard

n.howard1@lancaster.ac.uk

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7050-6371>

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Abstract

In response to the rapid development of educational technology and the desire to offer flexible learning opportunities, the implementation of blended learning is a burgeoning trend in contemporary higher education. However, limited research has been conducted into the professional identities of faculty members as they navigate this considerable shift in pedagogical practice. Through a qualitative, interpretivist approach, in-depth semi-structured interviews are utilised to elicit the subjective experiences and beliefs of a cohort of expatriate lecturers in the pilot stage of a blended learning initiative in a Middle East higher education institution. Applying the lens of positioning theory to analyse the subject positions both constituted and rejected by the participants, and subsequent to a thematic analysis of respondent narratives, five inductive themes of professional identity are presented. Contributing to the contemporary discourse of teacher professional identity, the findings reveal significant complexities and uncertainties facing educators in hybrid delivery modes which trigger misalignment with established pedagogical beliefs and invoke disruptions to professional personas. The paper concludes by comparing the findings with relevant, extant studies and addressing implications for policymakers implementing future blended models.

Key words: teacher professional identity, positioning theory, subject positions, higher education, blended learning

Introduction

The expeditious development of technology has transformed our modes of communication and meaning making (Viberg et al., 2019). Educational policies have responded with innovative pedagogies to equip learners with 21st century skills in preparation for the challenges they face in emerging occupational contexts (Avidov-Ungar & Forkos-Baruch, 2018). With this, instructional design has been overhauled, as colleges and universities systemically integrate both online and hybrid approaches (Carbonell et al., 2013). The diffusion of these innovative educational modalities, including blended approaches, continues to generate academic discourse regarding the role of technology in higher education reform (Saltmarsh & Sunderland-Smith, 2010). Whilst research into blended learning (BL) has increased over the past decade, surprisingly there is a paucity of studies probing the relationship between BL and teacher professional identity (PI), indicating the warrant in researching this phenomenon (Jonker et al., 2018).

The reported advantages of BL include flexible lesson delivery and access to materials, the appeal to a range of learner styles, cost reduction, greater efficiency, and tailored learning for the digitally literate (Cuesta Medina, 2018). However, the juxtaposition of online and offline instructional approaches presupposes imaginable disruption not only to pedagogical repertoires (McNaughton & Billot, 2016; Ocak, 2011), but also implies complex challenges to practitioners' existing attitudes, values and ideologies (Comas-Quinn, 2011; Gerbic, 2011). Moreover, the transition BL, and the teacher learning it requires, implies a deconstruction and reconstruction of existing identities (Jonker et al., 2018).

This qualitative study elucidates how lecturers position themselves in the nascent stage of a BL pilot programme at a tertiary institute in a Middle East nation. Eight in-depth interviews explore the participants' perspectives and experiences embedded in the BL context, and how these influence subject-positioning/identity formation and renegotiation. Applying the lens of positioning theory, an approach which centres on discursive identity formation and interpersonal relations (Hirvonen, 2016), and coupled with thematic analysis, this interpretive account reveals five inductive PI themes, against the backdrop of uncertainty and complexity in an emerging pedagogical context.

Literature Review

Blended Learning

BL has existed in diverse forms and proffered definitions have understandably evolved. Rooney (2003) suggested that BL encompassed any combination of online and face-to-face (F2F) instruction, while Niemiec (2006) proposed that courses with at least 25% of online delivery fit this category. Presently, BL courses commonly comprise three distinct delivery systems; F2F on-campus lectures, synchronous instruction via web-based technologies and asynchronous content accessed through a flipped classroom (FC) (Carbonell et al., 2013). In the FC component, learners preview content prior to the F2F session, which then functions as an opportunity to check comprehension of the material and to engage students in application activities (Lane, 2015).

While research has been growing in the BL domain, some scholars continue to equate blended curriculums as equivalent to general online education (Jonker et al., 2018). However, the juxtaposition of both instructional modes warrants specific inquiry, especially with the paucity of attention given to the *educators* operating in this milieu (Gerbic, 2011). Studies report benefits associated with BL, including augmented learner engagement, increased interaction between faculty and students, greater flexibility in instructional design, ongoing experimentation and improvement in practice (e.g. Vaughan, 2007), yet challenges are associated with its uptake. These include the amount of time required by teachers to both plan and deliver courses, the implied training and professional support required and the potential for faculty uneasiness with the emergent model (Vaughan, 2007). Moreover, since the merging of F2F and online teaching demands a more complex and flexible instructional repertoire, faculty are confronted with disruptions to their routines and tasked with adapting their existing pedagogical skills and professional beliefs (Jonker et al., 2018). Thus, this implies that the contemporary educational context impacts not only pedagogical roles but also influences teacher PIs (Hanson, 2009).

The preponderance of BL studies explores the learner perspective (e.g. Gerbic, 2011; Ocak, 2011), including research undertaken in the Middle East, which has predominantly concentrated on student experience, engagement and empowerment (e.g. Kemp, 2013; Isakovic & Mcnaught, 2013; Tamim, 2018). Some researchers have engaged with teacher beliefs as they adopt online and BL modes (e.g. Kim et al., 2013; Tondeur et al., 2017) and feelings (e.g. Philipsen et al., 2019), whilst other recent studies have examined the relationship between teacher *educators'* experience of BL and its impact on identity (e.g. Jonker et al., 2018; Viberg et al., 2019). Further studies have yielded prescriptive guidelines for teachers and institutions harnessing instructional technology (e.g. Bailey & Card, 2009; Carbonell et al., 2013). Pertinent to this study are those that probe the expansion and reshaping of educator *roles* as teachers navigate online and BL modes (e.g. Conceição, 2006; Coppola et al., 2002).

Online/BL Teaching Roles

Scholarly definitions of an educator's role are diverse, yet the notion may encompass "the set of understandings of what it means to be a teacher in a given context ... socio-historically constructed, institutionally maintained, and contextualized at the school level in response to the needs of the community" (Sexton, 2008, p. 75). Therefore, in this study, I understand role as the framework of what a teacher is required and expected to do in the execution of their professional responsibilities. Whilst roles reflect a greater sense of permanence (Harré & Lagenhove, 1999) and identity is characterised by its multiplicity and fluidity, it is meaningful to consider the extant studies addressing

changing teacher roles in hybrid and online contexts, since role shifts are exemplified by technological initiatives and integral to demands on identity (McNaughton & Billot, 2016).

Examining online instruction, and applying the lens of role theory, Coppola et al. (2002) identified teacher role shifts which cumulatively amounted to the evolution of a ‘Digital Socrates’ (p.9). This role shift involved a move from imparting knowledge to raising learner autonomy and was exemplified by domains: cognitive, affective, and managerial. The study revealed that when teaching online, cognitive instructional aspects may become more complex, and more intimate relationships with students might be fostered through increased communication, such as elicitation and interactive dialogues. However, instructors may too be subject to greater course management and monitoring demands (Coppola et al., 2002).

Some scholars suggest that the adoption of a BL mode may too cause a more facilitative, collaborative role to evolve (Conceição, 2006), requiring educators to embrace a transformative shift and “leave their previous constructs of what a teacher is behind ... to anticipate how the new model redefines them” (Kaleta et al., 2006, p. 137). Where a didactic approach has prevailed, some contend that BL has the capacity to redress this lecturer-led imbalance to foster contemporary, learner-centred teaching approaches, culminating in an evolution from the “sage on the stage” towards a more passive “guide on the side” (Baran et al., 2011, p. 429). However, the promise of a new, student-centric approach perhaps underplays the reality that lecturers may already be employing constructivist F2F teaching methods and assumes that they are actively adopting and engaging with new modalities of digital delivery, rather than resisting the potentially increasing regulatory and de-skilling effects associated with hybrid modes (Hanson, 2009). Thus, perhaps the equation of BL and student-centred teaching is more likely a result of the availability of resources to students who are endowed with extended learning pathways both synchronously and asynchronously, than a substantive shift in role or practice (Cuesta Medina, 2018). Incidentally, some studies have reported that the BL educator and F2F roles are *not* easily distinguishable (e.g. Donnelly, 2013). Meanwhile, in a comparative study of BL and F2F teachers, Huang (2019) demonstrated that F2F educators actually demonstrated greater student-centric approaches than their BL counterparts, who tended to deliver classes more didactically. Moreover, adopting a more student-centric approach may be constrained by several factors including lack of time, impersonal interactions, technological integration and usability and student reticence causing low participation (Ginns & Ellis, 2007). Perhaps this indicates why McShane (2004) suggests that the ‘traditional’ lecturer role invariably retains at least symbolic significance, upholding the status of the faculty member vis-à-vis perceived student and institutional expectations and, in more contemporary times, does not necessarily imply a didactic lecturing *at* learners.

Roles vs. Professional Identity

Whilst these studies expose various role functions adopted during online teaching and BL, certainly limited literature exists addressing the relationship between *identity* and BL amongst faculty whose beliefs and experience are firmly embedded in F2F instruction as they transition to the BL modality (Hanson, 2009). Roles, such as instructor and lecturer, define one’s occupational responsibility and expectations (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999) and tend to be formally assigned and relatively fixed, yet identity is constructed and reconstructed through experience and the actor’s understanding of that experience (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Thus, identity extends beyond role to encompass “how an individual mediates teaching—drawing upon different arrays of social positioning, experiences, and resources to enact their professional selves” (Sexton, 2008, p. 75). As

such, identity is an organising aspect of educator lives which fosters legitimization and justification of actor selves and their practice (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009).

Whilst the literature yields various conceptualisations of teacher PI¹ (Beijaard et al., 2004), Trede et al.'s (2012) review revealed that it is largely presented as “way of being and a lens to a evaluate, learn and make sense of practice” (p. 374). PIs are conceptualised as an individuals’ perceptions of professionalism, in terms of the routines, knowledge and skills required in the performance of an occupation, while also encompassing a personal, biographical trajectory of experiences (Beijaard et al., 2004; Jonker et al., 2018). It is in this performance that agency also becomes salient, whereby identities are constructed resultant to the interactions between subject positions and contextual factors (LaPointe, 2010). Furthermore, it is a continuous process, influences lived experience and is constructed and re-constructed at the nexus of “value-based doing, being, and self-representation” (McNaughton & Billot, 2016, pp. 645-646). PI formation and renegotiation is dynamic, constantly in flux and subjectified by the social and professional interactions in which it is constructed (LaPointe, 2010). Moreover, identities exist in plurality and are negotiated not only by the self, but also in the occupational discourses the individual is party to; agency is reflected in the identities one seeks to develop and preserve, but also in the positions one seeks to resist and avoid (Davies & Harré, 1990).

Hanson’s (2009) study is of influence of e-learning on academic identity is of particular relevance; the significant interplay between ICT-based pedagogy and identity invoked lecturers’ diminishing autonomy and increased insecurity regarding their technical aptitudes during the transition to e-learning. Moreover, participants encountered disruption to the sustainability of their existing identities, leading to “disembodied identity ... loss of teacher presence” and “a threat to their ontological security” (p. 561); they felt displaced as they transitioned from their perceived role of valued subject expert to one of passive facilitator of knowledge construction. Similarly, McNaughton et al. (2014) revealed the frustration and disempowerment of lecturers as they constructed competing, ambiguous professional selves during a video-conferencing initiative, whereby identities fluctuated between teacher, technician, puppet and performer. Meanwhile, Jonker et al. (2018) studied teacher *educators* engaged with BL and revealed four distinct identity constructs, shaped by the extent to which participants accepted or rejected and actively or passively embraced the modality. Such findings have significant implications for this inquiry, which facilitates further understanding of how lecturers adjusting to BL regard new practice, negotiate potential barriers to change, adapt to course delivery requirements and negotiate their resultant identities in the face of technologically led pedagogical shifts (Comas-Quinn, 2011).

Research Context

A contemporary higher education priority in this Middle East nation involves enhancing the conventional pedagogy with innovative technologies to support student-centric learning, prepare citizens for the digital workplace and bolster the knowledge economy (Kemp, 2013). The study’s locus is a tertiary college, and two institutional strategic aims relate to the promotion of digital literacy and the deployment of technology to facilitate flexible study opportunities - resulting in the piloting of a BL initiative. The focus of this study concerns the policy’s significance at the micro level; faculty in the General Education (GE) division, who have recently transitioned from fully F2F instruction to a hybrid model.

¹ *Professional* rather than *academic* identity has greater relevance since the study’s participants are untenured, not required to hold a PhD nor conduct research.

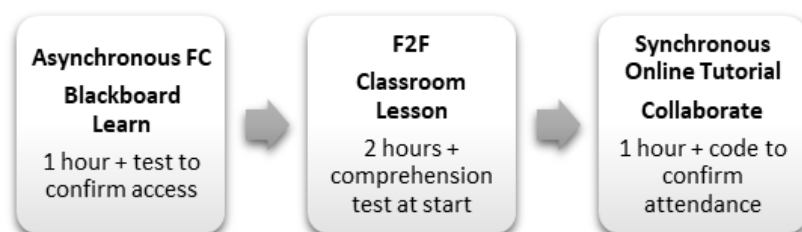
Research Questions

1. What are the lived experiences and beliefs of faculty delivering the BL model?
2. Applying the framework of positioning theory, how does the pedagogical transition to BL influence professional identities?
3. What can the findings add to previous studies in this area?

The BL Model

Figure 2 depicts the weekly instructional model. Prior to BL, each course consisted of four hours of F2F instruction time, divided over two sessions, with testing occurring at mid and final semester points. The new model includes two weekly assessments and three points of engagement; the FC (the students review a video or PowerPoint), a F2F session and mandatory online tutorial which students must access to gain an attendance code.

Figure 1. Weekly BL Model



The Framework of Positioning Theory

If PIs are shaped, developed and renegotiated in response to lived experiences then the shift from F2F to mixed mode instruction, which requires new skills, new demands and new practices, is certainly of worthy of an identity-based inquiry (Johnson et al., 2014). Davis and Harré's (1990) positioning theory is efficacious in affording theoretical insights into the inherent dynamism, complexity and multifaceted nature of PI in contemporary educational contexts (Burns & Bell, 2011; Hu et al., 2019).

Positioning theory, based in social constructionism and drawing on the Vygotskian sociocultural perspective, pertains to how one's subjective experiences and persona are developed through discursive subject positions, which emanate through social interaction (Burns & Bell, 2011; McVee, 2011). Positioning, by the self or others, manifests verbally and non-verbally, in and out of discourse, and may transpire on local, institutional and societal levels (Glazier, 2009). A position, situated in the social context, encompasses the rights, duties, and obligations of an individual (Harré & Moghaddam, 2003). A subject position then is "a conceptual repertoire ... a structure of rights and obligations for those that use that repertoire" (Trent, 2012, p. 106), and arises out of occupational routines (Harré et al., 2009). There is a continuous, dynamic interplay between these three aspects (Hu et al., 2019). Positions are embedded in lived experiences, or storylines, which are similar to internal narratives through which individuals enact behaviours, including speech acts, that are shaped by the

normative assumptions that actors believe they should adhere to (Hirvonen, 2016; Hu et al., 2019). Thus, positions, storylines and actions interact in a triadic relationship, whereby different positions evolve and adapt at the nexus of these three facets (McVee, 2011).

Types of Positioning

Positioning acts arise in a variety of orders and forms (Hirvonen, 2016). Pre-positioning, as shown above, originates in the role-like functions assigned to educators (Harré et al., 2009). First-order positioning involves the assigning of positions by the self and others and is largely tacit and immanent in everyday routines; for example, there is a universal understanding of the rights and duties existing between a student and teacher (Glazier, 2009). This may be displayed when a teacher asserts their right to assign tasks to a student. Second-order positioning transpires when the first order position is questioned or denied, leading to the renegotiation of the first order positioning (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999; Trent, 2012). In this circumstance, “repositioning oneself or others is to claim a right or duty to adjust what an actor has taken to be the first order positioning that is dominating the unfolding of events” (Harré & Moghaddam, 2003, p.7) - for example, when a student refuses to complete the assigned task. Third order positioning occurs externally to an original discourse, perhaps rhetorically; for example, when a student scribbles down a disparaging remark about a teacher (Glazier, 2009). This type of positioning, and its rejection, may also transpire when recounting prior episodes, for example, in the context of an interview (Hu et al., 2019).

Positioning universally involves a moral and a personal form; the *moral* position arises out of the expected roles and responsibilities of an actor; for example a teacher who is expected to impart knowledge to his students, which is then endowed with *personal* reference to the actor’s character: Mr Smith is a very *passionate* teacher (Glazier, 2009). Furthermore, positioning can be tacit, or intentional, whereby it is forced upon the self (by an employing organisation, for example) or by other members of a group (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999). With deliberate self-positioning a person desires to define their personal identity, potentially to recount their historical biography, accomplish a goal or frame a conversation in a particular manner (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999).

Faculty in the BE domain may be positioned interpersonally, by colleagues, by policy, by the institution and by students (Trent, 2012) and through discourse’s entwinement with material objects, including technological equipment and software (Hardy & Thomas, 2015)². Consistent positioning over time can lead to a type of persona being adopted. This persona is dependent on discursive structures embedded in the social context, the values ascribed to that position and the perceived roles and duties that the individual is expected to adhere to - which may all regulate the negotiation of PIs (Suh et al., 2013). In this study, the broad storyline situates the actors in the pilot phase of a BL initiative, which also encompasses the historical background of their professional lives, whereby they are pre-positioned in their roles as neophyte BL instructors (Hirvonen, 2016). Actions and speech acts emanate from interview responses and respondent recollections of previous interactions, as in Figure 1, below:

² The influence of socio-materiality on positioning was outside the scope of study.

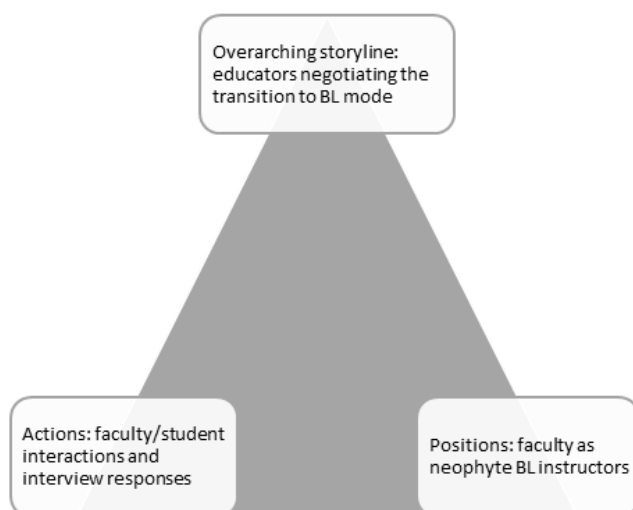


Figure 2: The Blended Learning Positioning Triad (adapted from Hu et al., 2019)

Methods

Participants

Due to geographical restrictions and the desire to conduct in-person interviews, I focused my research on the deep understanding of the research phenomena at a single institution (Punch, 1998). The department has ten lecturers, delivering general subjects including research methods and mathematics. I sent emails inviting all to participate, and while eight faculty members agreed to be interviewed, one participant retracted consent due to hospitalisation. The respondents' ages range from 37 to 65. Their mean average experience in HE is 14 years, with a 10-year mean average tenure at the institution and approximately six months initial experience in BL at the time of the study. The participants are MA, MSc or EdD degree holders, and their nationalities are Australian, South African, Canadian and American³.

Data Collection

The research design is informed by the qualitative paradigm and positioning theory, grounded in a constructionist ontology which holds that the social world is produced and reproduced interactionally (Bryman, 2008). Therefore, I mobilised semi-structured interviews for their flexibility and ability to provide a window into the professional lives of the participants (Robson & McCartan, 2016). I devised an initial frame of topics and potential questions, which provided direction, yet also allowed for divergence when pertinent aspects arose (Howard, 2019). Prior to the main interviews, I conducted a pilot study with one participant⁴. This allowed me to refine my interview style, gain an early insight into some relevant issues and adjust the interview schedule accordingly (Silverman, 2013).

While interviewing, I began by eliciting demographic data from the participants and then invited them to reflect on their professional trajectories and teaching philosophies. The purpose of this approach was to obtain in-depth biographical information connected to their historical teacher-selves. The objective of the remaining interview schedule was to 'incite narrative' (Watson, 2006, p. 512) of professional practice and encourage the interviewees to converse relatively freely. Questions

³ The majority of faculty in local tertiary institutions are expatriates (Austin et al., 2014).

⁴ Data are included in the analysis.

permitted participants to reflect on their previous practice as F2F educators and their current reality as BL teachers. At the interpersonal level they discussed their relationships with the institution, colleagues and students and at the intrapersonal level, their disciplinary, pedagogical and educational beliefs (Trent, 2012). Fortunately, the informants were willing to talk at length in interviews lasting approximately ninety minutes. This may be attributed to the study's timing, since participants expressed that the interview process was both reflexive and cathartic in the nascent and somewhat turbulent stage of the BL initiative. Following each interview, I requested permission to follow up by email if necessary, and this occurred on a number of occasions, allowing me to probe certain issues in more depth (Bryman, 2008). Within twenty-four hours of each interaction, the digital interview recordings were transcribed using online software and checked and edited for inconsistencies, enabling my immersion in the data from the outset (Bryman, 2008).

Positioning myself. While I am situated as an 'outsider' to BL, I was cognizant that my dual roles as colleague/researcher could influence the research process, yet by adhering to ethical, transparent research practices I have attempted to mitigate this. It is important to acknowledge that the interview in itself is a positioning act and should be understood in terms of the tri-polar position, speech-act and storyline (Harre & van Langenhove, 1999). My self-performance as researcher involves a discursive positioning, subject to its own fluidity relative to the research practice, social context and the intersubjective interactions with the interviewees (Walshaw, 2008). Accordingly, as researcher-subjectivity is implicated in gathering data, presenting a detailed account of researcher bias would be incongruent with this approach (Walshaw, 2008) for, 'like the texts we write, we can never be transcendent' (Lincoln & Denzin, 1998, p. 407). Instead, reflexively, I acknowledge that my researcher positioning is, to a degree, embedded in the knowledge arising from the meaningful social realities presented by the participants, and I analyse their meanings in their own terms and at the same time, as a result of the constitutive conversations we engaged in (Bryman, 2008; Howard, 2019).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was granted from both Lancaster University and the research site. All participants received a detailed information sheet, detailing their right to withdraw from the study, and to review their responses, at any time and provided informed consent in writing. Only I had access to the interview recordings and transcripts which were securely stored on an encrypted personal computer. As a researcher embedded in the context, issues of anonymity and power were taken into careful consideration and ameliorated by inviting the informants to participate by email, to avoid any intrusiveness (Bennett, 2020). Moreover, whilst I am an insider, I am employed in the GE department, which, I believe, reduced any potential power influence. I fully attempted to anonymise the respondents by withholding names, gender, the specific nation and any other identifying information when presenting the findings. Whilst complete confidentiality is never certain, every step was taken to achieve this.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was focused on building an understanding of how the interviewees construct understandings of their current occupational lives to present an interpretive account of PI. I conducted a thematic analysis informed by positioning theory (Hu et al., 2019), which began with repeatedly reading the transcripts to familiarise myself with the salient perceptions and experiences recounted by the interviewees. To effectively respond to the research questions, I was particularly focused on coding commentary related to positive and negative BL experience, teaching beliefs, changes in practice and shifting roles. Within this data set, I identified instances where participants'

words revealed their subject positioning either explicitly or implicitly and this collated text was systematically assigned and initial semantic codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Table 1 displays an initially coded excerpt:

Table 1
Coding Example

Sample excerpt	Codes
One issue stems from the rigid content . It just doesn't always work. Also, the students are really not participating or even asking me questions before or after class .	Ineffective materials Lack of classroom engagement Ss not seeking help
By and large, that's the requirement for it to work well. Also, I think allowing us to use our own ideas would be positive . I would say I have less control from when I actually started teaching in the college , because they've gone for standardized centralised kind of model.	Future orientation to BL Creativity Limited autonomy Past orientation Institutional direction Course centralisation Past orientation to practice
When I started five and a half years ago, it was more, here's your learning outcomes and here's some suggested content , but you can do more or less what you want teaching wise .	Curriculum Prior flexible practice

Coding the text was an inductive, iterative process, with some codes becoming collapsed, and others added, eventually leading to the final codes, being holistically organised into themes, with corresponding excerpts, relevant to the research questions (Trent, 2012). The themes emerging from the narratives illustrate a comprehensive depiction of the lecturers' collective lived experiences (Aronson, 1995). In order to ensure trustworthiness, I forwarded the excerpts to the corresponding participant, to confirm legitimacy and interpretation (Jonker et al., 2018). For clarity and brevity, discrete themes with meaningful labels (Boyatzis, 1998) are presented, which although ostensibly reductionist, arise from repetitive patterns in the substantial data which were collected, analysed and aggregated to achieve thematic saturation (Hu et al., 2019). In elucidating the themes, the excerpts are presented as bounded, "cleaned up" segments (Reissman, 2008, p. 61).

Findings

Embedded in their biographical narratives, and abstracted from the BL environment, participants universally described their established professionalism, highlighting the substantive value of their lengthy HE F2F experience, subject expertise, dedication to improving practice and student-centred approaches. Nevertheless, significant identity shifts and renegotiations attributed to the BL mode are embedded in the five themes discussed below: challenges to professional agency, reduced self-efficacy, underutilised subject expertise, increased administrative roles and widening divisions between faculty and students. These themes illustrate the subjective demands experienced by GE faculty members as they are simultaneously positioned as neophyte BL actors delivering a new initiative, as mediators of complex mixed-mode practice and negotiators of their own PIs, managing the tensions between multiple subject positions (Saltmarsh & Sutherland-Smith, 2010). The following account responds to the first two research questions:

What are the lived experiences and beliefs of faculty delivering the BL model?

Applying the framework of positioning theory, how does the pedagogical transition to BL influence professional identities?

Theme 1: Challenges to professional agency

Professional agency is an integral aspect of PI formation and renegotiation (Trede et al., 2012). Powerful agency is achieved through the capacity of actors to negotiate and adopt subject positions by adapting to, or resisting, certain storylines (Mishler, 1999). However, when educators are faced with formidable challenges that limit their autonomy, they are unable to resist these storylines in their professional practice (Rodgers & Scott, 2008). Since BL ultimately resulted in greater standardization, most participants felt constrained: they experienced diminishing agency and described their inability to employ existing teaching styles in the F2F classes. Moreover, a further corollary of standardization was pre-set course materials, limiting the autonomy faculty previously exercised in materials development and selection. The teachers' pre-positioning as professionals appeared to be illegitimated by their reduced agency, confounded by the view that pre-determined BL materials were poorly designed and sometimes irrelevant. Moreover, with identity processes so deeply embedded in context and responding to pressures to assimilate themselves to new practices, educators were subject to BL contextual factors which reduced their creativity. For instance, Participant A adopted the position of being professionally displaced by the imposed restrictions, moving from a previously held subject position as an innovative teacher:

I feel that with the centralization of courses and the way they're delivered online, there's much less space to be creative and do what I was doing before. It's more restricted and difficult to be professional in this environment.

Whilst most participants adopted accepting subject positions oriented towards the value of technological integration in education, there were questions as to how this could be reconciled with the innate flexibility required of a practitioner. Participant C lamented how changes in practice, due to centralized course materials, reduced the pedagogical space to foster critical thinking amongst learners. The following narrative reveals C's limited subject-position, caused by a reduction in autonomy, constraining an idealised student-centric approach:

I can't teach them to think now. They're not becoming thinkers. I want to be able to use my own examples, but the FC was teaching them the recorded temperature in 50 states. Who cares about the US temperatures in Fahrenheit? It's just not related to their world.

Such instances highlight how teachers are positioned by the limiting institutional framework they operate in; the reduction in teacher autonomy in terms of their pedagogical freedoms and resources is manifested in the largely oppositional subject positions to the existing BL context, resulting in newly formed identities characterised by restrictive practice.

Theme 2: Reduced professional self-efficacy

Self-efficacy is a salient consideration in the construction of a robust PI, whereby educators seek to establish a personal conviction in their competence for teaching, master instructional techniques and steer learners to success (Spilková, 2011). When this conviction is undermined, it leads to re-positioning, and ultimately comprises an individual's image of professional self. It was apparent that most interviewees experienced threats to their pedagogical effectiveness since the implementation of BL, revealing the desire to fully adopt the effective teacher identities they recounted biographically, and reflective of the genre of outcomes in second order positioning they sought to regain (Trent, 2012). These positioning shifts were broadly related to the reduction of F2F instruction time, provoking diminishing learner engagement and in several cases, greater numbers of

floundering students. These factors impacted on the teachers' current perceptions of self-efficacy as they negotiated the BL mode, and were embedded in emotional accounts characterising BL as an obstacle in itself to learning, resulting in participants' self-positioning as ineffectual agents:

E: I would say for eight years, in each section, if I had a failure, that would be disappointing. Now, I'm seeing six, seven, eight failures in a section. So, many students are falling by the wayside because of [BL].

Furthermore, with exiguous evidence of students engaging with the FC component, participants were posed with a formidable challenge – they felt required to mediate this by revisiting the material F2F, confounded by only half the instruction time they formerly occupied. Responding to this, Participant D felt compelled to act, albeit in a restricted way, “I still have to go over the materials again ... I'm having to squeeze it in because the students need it.” This caused similar tension and ambivalence for F, who questioned their ability to mediate difficulties:

You have situations where the students haven't prepared, they haven't done [the FC] and it's really obvious. Then you have to figure out what you're going to do in the class. How much time should I spend on this? It just puts more pressure on me.

This theme was even more evident in a narrative from Participant G, who expressed concern at how classroom practice became a façade or role play, even elucidating on his ‘robotic’ practice and ‘jostling’ students along the course trajectory. The impassioned response and use of metaphor in this excerpt help elucidate the significant impact on G's positioning and G's disillusionment with the status quo. Whilst G's first-order positioning by students as a traditional source of knowledge occurs, G recalls feeling forced to reciprocally reject this position momentarily, adopting a forced self-positioning of incapacity to act. Moreover, this reveals how G felt positioned by the institutional policy, undermining the ideal teaching self:

There's a lot of Emperor's New Clothes going on here. We're not teaching them we are getting them through this level. We're when I say this, you say this. But when someone asks me a question, because they don't understand, it breaks my heart because there is no way to help them, other than just throwing on the brakes and completely suspending blended learning and going back to a traditional kind of teaching that helps them.

The under-achieving identities adopted up by participants lament the reduction in perceived self-efficacy, yet also display a future and past orientation, reflecting a robust keenness to foster learning and progress in their students, against the backdrop of increasing failure rates and poor student engagement.

Theme 3: Underutilised subject expertise

A further PI renegotiation was evidenced in the underutilization of the participants' subject expertise; a significant source from which actors derive PI (Beijaard et al., 2004). Despite the ostensible link between decreasing academic success and BL discussed above, it was interesting to find that the online tutorial component was a largely neglected resource. The storylines revealed emotional reactions characterized by disillusionment and frustration levied at the students' disinterest in engaging in dialogue or using the tutorial sessions in any substantive way. Recounted in discourse that explicitly questioned the synchronous component's value, the universal perception amongst participants was that students viewed the tutorial time as an attendance control devoid of pedagogical value. Participant A stated, “They're not popular at all. They don't ask any questions. They sign on. They sign off.” Other participants too described having none or few meaningful online interactions with students since the inception of BL. The widespread failure of the online tutorial resulted in

uncertainty, prompting the participants to question why their pedagogical capital was consistently eschewed by students. This led to G's self-positioning as an underutilized resource:

It's such a waste. They could have a really productive session and we could bridge the gap between what they don't understand [in the FC] if they took it seriously and asked me questions. That's what I am here for, after all.

Participant E echoed this sentiment, delivering a discourse characterised by dismay and surprisingly, fear. When describing how unsuccessful the online tutorials had become, E emotionally questioned the shift in professional persona, reflecting the third order positioning of E as a 'victim,' suffering missed opportunities for student engagement due to the prioritised implementation of digital learning spaces over F2F contact (van Langenhove & Bertolink, 1999). E's internal dialogue represents intrapersonal positioning:

Silence - nothing that's a deeply disappointing outcome for a teacher. It made me feel like I wasn't even a teacher. What was I? I was very, very disappointed and confused. It was the most disappointing thing last semester – I would have nightmares about the tutorials.

In the broad storyline of online tutorials, the students' singular emphasis on recording attendance, combined with the non-verbal indication of their lack of desire to exploit the teachers' pedagogical knowledge, positions the teachers as underutilized and undermines their subject expertise.

Theme 4: Increased administrative roles

A further influence on PI was witnessed in the additional administrative roles imposed on faculty; new roles provoke identity fluctuations as individuals experience and makes sense of them (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). When tasked with additional administrative responsibilities, lecturers are confronted with conflicts to their PIs (Billot, 2010) and regressive subject positioning resultant to excessive administrative overload has been previously documented (e.g. Ylijoki & Ursin, 2013). The participant teachers newly engaged in the BL model widely reported the imposition of administration tasks, which shifted their PI from favourable, self-pre-positions such as 'caring teacher' 'nurturer' and 'facilitator' to 'administrator' (Hu et al., 2019). These shifts occurred at the juncture of increased testing, complicated attendance procedures and self-assignment of students to classes. Participant G expressed resentment towards increased administration, challenging a forced positioning by the BL policy:

[The college] is making it more difficult and shifting the responsibility to the individual practitioner. A lot of these admin roles being transferred automatically. But why do I have to split students? Why do I have to make Smart Views?

Participants positioned themselves as responsible for supervising record-keeping over instruction when mandatory online testing caused an additional deficit in F2F instruction time, as recounted by participant E:

The first 20 minutes is the administrative task and other things like teaching and covering the content are not happening in those 20 minutes ... it is becoming much more administrative than it was before.

The interviewees were also tasked with convoluted procedures for recording attendance, which resulted in an unwelcome, additional workload. This was elaborated on by Participant C, as a recipient of explanations as to why they could not complete work, was tacitly positioned by students

as a gate-keeper, but also informed by the storyline of students' responsibilities and duties, leading to C's positioning of students as excuse-givers, undermining (Hu et al., 2019).

The students take the [FC] quiz and you can't take attendance until the next week. There are so many excuses they make. Sorry, I couldn't log on. I tried or I went to the online tutorial, but I didn't have the code. There are a lot of problems with that and that's more busy work for me.

These identities demonstrate that teachers resent the extraneous responsibilities which they perceive as tedious, sometimes onerous, and in conflict with the execution of their instructional roles. Underpinning this theme is the displacement of the participants from their pre-positioned role of teacher to administrator, exerting pressure on their PIs.

Theme 5: Widening division between faculty and students

Interpersonal faculty and student interactions exert a significant impact on lecturer positioning and, consequently, PI (van der Want et al., 2018). The final theme emanates from the divisions which developed between the participants and their learners. As the lecturers held established F2F teaching identities, developed through valuable interactions with students (Hanson, 2009), they now expressed concern at the reduced physical student presence; valuing familiarity and emotional connections with individual learners as pre-conditions to building rapport and engendering motivation. They felt a shift in their self-image, grounded in the value ascribed to intimate, embodied, co-present instructional interactions which were once highly present in the F2F mode (Hanson, 2009; Saltmarsh & Sutherland-Smith, 2010). In this excerpt, A positions the students as generic, disembodied actors (Sabri, 2011), detached from the co-constructive learning process:

Because you've got a bigger section you might have forty-five people in one group, and it's difficult to get to know them as well. They're just a number or a name on a screen. It's not like, before - oh, Miriam. Yes, I know her. It has changed the whole dynamic.

Similarly, storylines of larger student numbers triggered shifts in previously close affiliations, prompting feelings of unfamiliarity with students and distanced identities, especially regarding the average achievers. Participant B felt compelled to negotiate this positioning by prioritising the monitoring of weaker learners:

It's just impossible to keep track. So only the really the high achievers, who are sitting up the front and are determined that I know them are the ones I get to know. Or the ones who are really slacking and I am chasing because they aren't doing certain things. All the students in the middle, without question, I don't get to build a relationship with.

When reflecting on how BL transformed practice, participants described the incipient polarisation of faculty and students. While B acknowledged that a policy rationale of BL is the fostering of learner independence, this did not distract B from sentiments of separation and positioning shifts. It positioned B outside the enjoyable realm of the learning experience, as a less significant actor, whilst displaying the ironic reality that a principal objective of BL, learner autonomy, was unaccomplished:

I am much more cut off from the students than I was before [BL]. There's less of a connection and the students know I'm just throwing the work at them. I don't want that kind of relationship. I guess the idea is that the student should be accountable but even that is not happening.

The loss of familiarity, linked to increasing class sizes and reduced F2F instruction, impacted on the previously conducive interpersonal connections with students and impeded the reification of their professional subject positions, culminating in the challenges to their robust F2F PIs.

These prevalent themes were experienced by all or most of the informants during their transition to BL, highlighting the multiplicity and complexity of PI. Despite chiefly oppositional sub-texts and themes emerging from the data, a surprising finding was some respondents' optimism and potential professional alignment with an idealized model of BL, featuring reduced testing and interactive FCs. Moreover, some respondents indicated that viewing learners as a homogenous set, equally capable of studying under this mode underpinned its inadequacies - a lack of student engagement and increase in student failures. Several interviewees proposed an elective BL model, perhaps targeted at those with stronger English language competencies to access the FC and online tutorials, with some also questioning whether the Arab cultural context was an inherent barrier to self-directed learning (Kemp, 2013).

Discussion

Through the lens of positioning theory, this study demonstrates how faculty members, as relative neophytes in the BL educational milieu, navigate this new pedagogical context and negotiate their PIs. The findings demonstrate how lecturers' perceptions and experiences of the emerging context intersect with the ontological and methodological concerns they hold regarding the introduction of new technologies (Saltmarsh & Sunderland-Smith, 2010). Moreover, when unfamiliar teaching trajectories result in challenges to educators' established beliefs and philosophies (Geijsel & Meijers, 2005) and disharmony between their roles and expectations (Sexton, 2008), new positionings inevitably occur. Thus, the findings reveal five salient themes which appear to hinder positive PIs: challenges to professional agency, reduced self-efficacy, underutilised subject expertise, increased administrative roles and widening divisions between faculty and students. The following section responds to the final research question.

What can the findings add to previous studies in this area?

The study's participants were confronted with difficulties in reconciling BL practices with established pedagogical philosophies and adopted an oppositional stance towards changes in interactions, the pressurised teaching context, inability to foster creative thinking skills and difficulties individualising their instruction, extending on Jonker et al. (2018). As evidenced in the biographical narratives recounted by the respondents here, despite undergoing the transition to partial or fully online instruction, the notion that teachers commonly retain their established philosophies and beliefs corresponds with prior studies (e.g. Tondeur et al., 2017). Hanson's (2009) participants too demonstrated robust historical identities related to their pedagogical practices, pride in teaching and concern for learner achievement, whilst Baran et al., (2011) discovered that educators adapt their professional selves on a pragmatic level, yet at the conceptual level, educational philosophies are sustained. The conflict between historical educational beliefs and emerging identities demonstrates the complexity, fragility and multiplicity of PI construction and renegotiation. Thus, while this study reveals that F2F classes are more conducive to the positive reinforcement of professional self-positioning, educators resist the diminished agency arising through the digitalisation of resources and course centralisation, resulting in predominantly regressive subject-positioning.

Similarly, restricted F2F time also reduces lecturers' perceptions of self-efficacy whilst depreciating their pedagogical capital. Disruptions to established identities were underpinned by the reduction in 'quality' F2F teaching time and inadequate integration between the online and F2F

components, supporting Comas-Quinn's findings (2011). The storylines surrounding online tutorials suggest an unsurprising hinderance towards the reification of PI when student engagement and investment are minimal, as indicated by Comas-Quinn (2011) and highlight the disengagement some educators also recounted in McNaughton and Billot (2016). Moreover, increased administrative responsibilities (e.g. Baran et al., 2011), amplified student-educator ratios (Cuesta Medina, 2018) and faltering student achievement teachers to position themselves unfavourably. All participants prioritised dedicated F2F instruction over digital forms of delivery and their resistance to the online components appears rational and warranted, reflecting their desire to protect their historical PIs, former F2F teaching efficacy and previously close interactions with learners (Hanson, 2009).

There are certainly commonalities, albeit with different causalities, building on Hanson's study's findings of academic identity and e-learning. Hanson (2009) reported that the uptake of technological resources was a major obstacle to the acceptance of e-learning, culminating in distinct identity themes. Firstly, the displacement of the expert identity occurred when academics knowledge resources were attenuated by their students' superior technical skills. However, whilst none of the participants in this study encountered issues with their technological deployment or skills (c.f. Comas-Quinn, 2011), comparable PI displacement occurred due to a lack of student engagement in the *underutilised subject expertise* theme, whereby the teachers' knowledge and expertise triggered frustration and disillusionment, and the diminishing achievements of students in the *reduced professional self-efficacy* construct. Additionally, the *challenges to agency theme* highlights how ontological identity tension is borne out of a reduction in capacity to act in a creative and autonomous manner, echoing Hanson's (2009) observation that ontological security is threatened by limited productive classroom learning. Moreover, *the widening divisions between faculty and students theme* depicts the withering of valuable relationships which actors value and draw upon in safeguarding their existing professional personas (Hanson, 2009). These disconnected identities emerge from the polarisation of students and educators, reminiscent of a lack of 'qualitative rapport' evidenced by Jonker et al. (2018, p. 129), and extending on Conceição's (2006) finding that reduced F2F interactions foster greater impersonality and feelings of disconnect, leading to educator resistance to online teaching.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the transition from F2F to BL was characterised by pedagogical ineffectiveness, lecturer uncertainty and relational disharmony. When confronted with limitations to pedagogical agency, educators sense a devaluation of their pedagogical worth and feel powerless to mitigate student failures, culminating in a subject positioning which is adversarial to policy discourses. Additionally, when administrative functions overshadow authentic practice and interpersonal relationships with students are jeopardised, lecturers experience difficulties reifying former conceptions of their professional selves. Thus, it is suggested that policymakers be cognizant of how institutional discourse positions BL educators and the identity constructs this causes them to adopt over time. This indicates dual necessities; embedding opportunities for faculty members to reflect on the renegotiations of their PIs as they navigate new practice (Saltmarsh & Sunderland-Smith, 2010) and recognising the salience of BL professional development schemes (Tondeur et al., 2017). Such measures may foster positive connotations of self- and organisational positioning of BL educators as 'beneficiaries' not 'victims' of BL storylines (van Langenhove & Bertolink, 1999, p. 125). To acknowledge educators' situated experiences and respond to their disconcerting realities, it is perhaps also incumbent on decision-makers implementing policies to regularly survey their faculty members, endow them with flexibility and actively collaborate with them in developing hybrid modes and materials - educators develop affirmative PIs and perceive online teaching as an innovative and

gratifying practice when they are engaged in instructional design and not merely ‘deliverers’ of a policy initiative (Conceição 2006).

Whilst BL research has increased in recent years, this inquiry responds to the paucity of studies probing the complexity experienced by neophyte BL lecturers during their transition to hybrid-mode instruction. Moreover, it demonstrates how synthesising positioning theory with an inquiry into PI offers a critical perspective to examine the association between new technological pedagogies and the negotiation of existing educator subject positions. By attending to the narratives of those undergoing the challenges of a local implementation of a blended approach, and the struggles to affirm their PI, the study contributes to contemporaneous academic discourse regarding the role of technology in higher education reform (Saltmarsh & Sunderland-Smith, 2010). Finally, it has recommended that leaders effectively involve faculty in BL design and provided insights into how to effectively respond to the identity challenges faced by experienced F2F lecturers progressing into hybrid modes.

Limitations

This small-scale qualitative study does not seek to present broadly generalizable findings: the objective is to reveal insights which could further our academic understanding of the shifts in PI in a specific institutionally bound context and cohort of lecturers, by giving extended voice to the actors involved. However, given the proliferation of digital educational modalities, it is conceivable that other novice BL educators face analogous obstacles in aligning their PIs with BL modalities. Additionally, it was beyond the scope of this study to interview participants more than once, so to corroborate and extend on these findings, future studies could further exploit the critical capacity of positioning theory, utilising a longitudinal approach to investigate shifts in, and potential disruptions to, educator PIs arising at the nexus of the indisputable complexity and uncertainty associated with BL.

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