



Agentic Online Learning: How University Staff Make Their Work Matter

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Received: 27 June 2025 / Revised: 14 February 2026 / Accepted: 16 February 2026 /
Published online: 16 March 2026
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Abstract

How do Higher Education (HE) academic staff depict their experience of online education? In this article we report how they discursively construct both themselves as actors in online educational spaces, and their efforts as desirable and worthwhile. We conducted an interpretative qualitative analysis, examining the discourse and discursive practices of staff at an Irish university as they discussed their experiences with online education. Our findings consist of two participant discourses. Involvement in their work existentially matters to staff, and staff and their work exist in a reciprocal relationship with each other. We further divide these into five sub-discourses: their work gave staff a sense of purpose, their work reflected staff's senses of identity, staff coped with challenges that their work raised, staff confronted work realities by investing themselves, and staff navigated tensions between being the shepherds or originators of work concepts. We conclude by discussing the implications of our findings, particularly critiquing the trend to fit staff into our theoretical notions of what online education practice should look like. We call on researchers and practitioners to be inspired by exemplary practitioners, rather than using them as tools that are useful to the extent they allow us to champion our educational interests.

Keywords Online education · Higher education · Discourse analysis · Discursive psychology · University staff

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Introduction

How do Higher Education (HE) academic staff depict their experience of online education? While not a new topic in the literature (for some recent examples, see Berry 2019; Halupa 2019; Martin et al. 2019a, b; Singh et al. 2023), it still merits consideration. We are concerned that too much prior research loses how online education matters to those who create, teach, or administer courses and programmes. Staff are not variables that researchers or online course designers can adjust to fine tune the educational ecology, or worse, obstacles that stand in the way of their vision of what online education should be (often couched in the language of best practices; e.g., Lewis 2021), and who therefore need to be trained or managed into compliance. Yet a common trend in online education (Bayne 2015; Bayne et al. 2020; Houlden and Veletsianos 2019), and, indeed, going back even further to prior educational technologies like computer-based instruction and programmed instruction (Gilbert 1971; Post 1972), has been to treat them as such. This leaves us with a distorted, impoverished picture of who academic staff are, ‘blind[ing] us to modes of action’ in relation to them that ‘fall outside [this] means-ends framework’ (Fowers 2010: 103).

Postdigital conceptions of online learning offer alternatives to these trends by drawing attention to complex digital, physical and social ecologies of interconnection (Fawns et al. 2021; Bayne et al. 2020). Our contribution towards this was to study staff at an Irish university, focusing on how they discursively constructed themselves as actors in online educational spaces, along with how they constructed their efforts as desirable and worthwhile. We began from the position of methodologically conceptualising staff as active agents, who, through whatever practical means were close at hand, creatively enacted online education as an event of local concern (Lieberman 2013; Packer 2018). This promised to foreground how they skillfully coped with the socio-material circumstances they faced so as to ‘move away from instrumental and essentialist constructions of technology’ and instead describe staff agency as distributed within ‘the delicate material and cultural ecologies within which life is sustained’ (Bayne 2015: 11).

Background and Prior Literature

Our research aligns with Cormier et al.’s (2019) observation that ‘the transition to a postdigital way of thinking allows for that previously coded as “digital” to be woven into the wider discussion of social dialects that people bring to their acts of collaboration’ (477). We sought to contribute to ideas of postdigital education by proposing that, like the ‘digital,’ it is not actually transparently obvious what staff are referring to when they discursively construct themselves as actors in the online space. This is reflected in much of the ‘mainstream’ literature on online education that has focused on gathering staff opinions about online education as if they had relatively stable ideas that could reliably be collected, summarised, and reported apart from any particular event of online education they were

currently experiencing (recent examples include Caskurlu et al. 2021; Kerr-Sims and Baker 2021; Marasi et al. 2022; Xie et al. 2021).

Indeed, it is clear that understanding HE staff as agents who actively enact online education requires us to avoid at least two trends that are common in much of the literature, but, in fact, have been extensively critiqued in postdigital thought. The first was that of essentially treating staff as objects that can be acted upon like any other, and, consequently, whose behaviour can be optimised by the application of correct technique. This trend is clear in literature that theorises resistance to online education as a deficiency in the right environmental conditions; perhaps the proper professional development is not in place (Lockee 2021; McGee et al. 2017), or the proper incentives (Nagashima and Hrach 2021). It argues that issues like low rates of adoption, satisfaction, and so on, can be solved by organising relevant environmental factors to favour desired outcomes. If the motives underlying staff's actions are considered at all, they tend to be reduced to relatively simple constructs, smoothing out differences among individuals.

For instance, in Porter and Graham's (2016) study of blended learning adoption, they grouped faculty into categories like 'early adopter' and 'laggard' (751) based on how many educational technologies their participants reported using. Their categories, drawn from Rogers (2003) Diffusion of Innovations model as adapted to digital learning by Zemsky and Massy (2004), are commonly used in online education and do provide evaluative insights in certain, limited situations where events are fairly straightforward and do not require sophisticated theoretical analysis. However, the model 'does not offer insight into the evolution of digital learning and the emotional work of teachers in adopting digital tools in their practices. It cannot explain why people take up one technology and abandon another' (Jandrić 2015: 5–6). In Porter and Graham's study, this meant that those who questioned online education based on well-considered pedagogical philosophies were grouped into the same category as those whose actions were clearly due to fundamental misunderstandings about online technologies. It seems the differences in their motives would matter in their eventual decision to adopt blended learning (or not). For example, their analysis did not include ethical matters associated with online or blended modalities, not least of which are concerns about online education's culture of surveillance (Bayne et al. 2020; Morris and Stommel 2018) or how so much online teaching has been turned over to adjuncts who do not have the influence or job security to push back against harmful power structures (Kraft 2020). Yet because the researchers were not sensitive to such differences, their conclusions did not reflect this possibility.

The second trend, while allowing that staff are actors in the online educational ecology, still treats their role as essentially passive. This occurs by positioning online education as the application of canonical theories/techniques of learning and instruction that exist independently as forces to harness, like electricity, and where staff are largely meant to implement that received knowledge base effectively (Gibbons 2013). In this view, the forces of learning/instruction are still the active agents in online education. Staff might be convenient tools to put such forces into effect, but they are tools all the same, and can be replaced if a more effective instrument is found (Wrathall 2011).

These technologically deterministic views have been richly studied in postdigital online learning contexts (Bayne et al. 2020; Fawns et al. 2021; Jandrić and Knox 2022) and have led to more socio-material theoretical positions that attempt to go beyond ‘isolated ideas of technologies or teaching methods, to the situated, entangled combinations of diverse elements involved in educational activity’ (Fawns 2022: 711). While research reflecting deterministic assumptions was more common in the early days of educational technology (Gur and Wiley 2007), we can still find it today. As a recent, striking example, we point to Putri et al.’s (2024: 511) claim that because students using a self-paced learning module achieved ‘a statistically significant improvement in ... test scores’ compared to those who were taught by a teacher, ‘technology can replace’ instructors without loss. While Putri et al. were perhaps more explicit than most researchers are willing, similar allusions and assumptions underlie much of the research seeking to optimise or otherwise maximise the efficiency of online education (see McDonald and Ventura 2025).

Closing off both of these assumptions enabled our research to position staff as active, taking a stand on the forms of life they inhabit by uniquely redirecting, reshaping, and refocusing their worlds, at the same time they are redirected, reshaped, and refocused by them (Packer 2018). This aligns with trends in postdigital research, in that we resisted conceptualising ‘online’ and similar constructs as settled and uncontested terms that can be deployed as an uncomplicated shorthand for something that is, instead, ‘messy; unpredictable; digital and analog; technological and non-technological; biological and informational’ (Jandrić et al. 2018: 895; see also Bayne et al. 2020; MacKenzie et al. 2022). In our study, this meant that since we were focused on how staff construct online education as a worthwhile endeavour, we anticipated finding that their ideas about the digital, education, and the relationship between them might differ, even dramatically, based on what was then happening, had recently happened, or what they anticipated happening in the future. We anticipated that some participants might make inconsistent claims from one moment to the next. These were not deficiencies for us to smooth out, but part of a rich tapestry of discourse to reflect as accurately as possible.

A similar contrast can be made with prior literature studying what staff do when designing, teaching, administering online courses, or readying themselves to do so. This literature may not be sufficiently sensitive to differences that could arise in staff practices when their circumstances alter, including when their own ideas or attitudes about online education change. For example, Martin et al. (2019b) studied how faculty who had won online teaching awards reported their own activities related to course design, assessment, evaluation, or teaching. Throughout their study they tended to assume faculty practices were stable (34). Their coding and analysis procedures reduced faculty responses into simple statements (e.g., ‘backwards design’ (38)) that created an artificial sense of stability by concealing differences among participants, or how individual participants might have differed from one course to the next. Our study did not assume that any individual’s day-to-day practices were consistent, and thus attempted to solicit how they responded differently to differing events.

Resisting these trends, and assuming variability in our participants’ experience, allowed us to better see the active role they played in directing their own

experiences (cf. Yanchar 2021). Additionally, we took inspiration from Packer's (2018: 300) observation that 'every existing human community must have grasped something essential about the way the world is.' This not only applies to communities in far-off regions; it applies equally to those close at hand. Accordingly, as we were challenged by the insights of those we studied, we found ourselves able to articulate a perspective on how we, collectively, might experience the world of education more attuned 'to the inclusivity of the knowledge-making process and the communal positioning' of postdigital research (Knox 2024).

Method

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were used to collect data, which was analysed using a discursive psychology analytic approach (Edley 2001; Edwards 2012; McMullen 2021). Through the utilisation of language as a resource in 'analysing the participants' constructions of their social world' (Brunton et al. 2019: 400), we identified patterns within and across conversations with participants in order to develop an account of how they discursively constructed themselves in their work.

Participants and Interviews

We interviewed three staff members, purposefully selected as 'paradigmatic cases' (Flyvbjerg 2001: 79). These cases are chosen for their 'prototypical value,' meaning they 'provide a unique wealth of information' (Flyvbjerg 2001: 81) about the phenomenon under study. Paradigmatic cases are chosen because, in their distinctness, they promise to provide novel insights that are not available through comparative methods.

The participants were chosen for their very different experiences of online education:

- Matthew: a programme chair for an online degree, whose work focuses on programme issues like recruiting, retention, maintaining student services, etc. and is concerned with quality of teaching.
- Clare: a tenure-track instructor designing and teaching an online module for graduate research methods.
- Anne: a postdoctoral instructor, designing and developing an informal, self-guided resource for religious education.

Following principles outlined by Seidman (2006), the first author carried out in-depth, semi-structured interviews with our participants. Clare was interviewed twice, and Matthew and Anne three times. Each interview lasted 45–60 min and was recorded and transcribed. First interviews centred on our participants' backgrounds in their individual roles, insights they had developed about the forms of online education in which they were involved, and specific instances that illustrated their practical stances on issues related to design, online education, quality, and so on. Second and third interviews were based on

insights from our initial conversations, offering chances to follow up with each participant on topics related to their distinct role in online education.

Data Analysis

We utilised a discursive psychology analytic approach (Edley 2001; Edwards 2012; McMullen 2021) to analyse the transcribed and prepared data, while using an adapted form of the six steps of Braun and Clarke's (2021) Reflexive Thematic Analysis as an organising frame.

Our discursive psychology analysis began with each author individually reviewing interview transcripts for one participant, following an adapted version of the first three steps of Braun and Clarke (2021):

- (a) Reading and rereading each transcript;
- (b) Producing initial codes;
- (c) Sorting and grouping codes together in order to detail patterns 'within language in use' (Taylor 2001: 8).

All authors then collaborated on additional discursive psychology analysis, using Braun and Clarke's (2021) steps as a frame:

- (d) Reviewing and developing our initially developed analysis for each participant. This occurred in a collaborative document where each author could critique, challenge, combine, or otherwise extend the analysis of the others. Regular meetings allowed authors to discuss their individual findings as well as responses to those of the other authors. Consistent with our methodological commitments we aimed to be 'transparent [by] spell[ing] out the details' of our interpretation, while also making claims that were 'warranted [by] lay[ing] out the evidence' for our assertions (Packer 2018: 141). This approach continued as we moved into steps (e) and (f) below.
- (e) Continuing to revise our analysis by refining, defining, and naming the parts of the categorical system, comparing/contrasting each part to others as well as to the original transcripts;
- (f) Engaging in iterative cycles of writing up our findings, both in terms of how participants constructed themselves as active actors in the forms of online learning they encountered (see Newkirk 1992) and with respect to the discursive devices and resources used to accomplish such constructions (McMullen 2021). We identified supporting quotes from the original transcripts that illustrated the analytic points in the findings.

Findings

Our findings comprise two discourses and five sub-discourses (see Table 1), relating to how participants constructed themselves as concernfully navigating work ecosystems (we use the word 'work' to encompass programmes, modules/courses, and projects).

Table 1 Findings summary

Discourses	Subdiscourses	Analytic takeaway
Their work existentially mattered to staff	Their work • Provided a sense of purpose • Reflected staffs' senses of identity	Participants positioned course design as a third space, where work embodied their personal commitments about education and were attempts to respond to situational needs
	Staff • Coped with work challenges • Confronted work realities by investing themselves • Navigated tensions between being 'shepherds' or 'originators' of concepts that shaped their work	Participants invested their personhood, and available effort, to confront and cope with challenges

Work Existentially Mattered

Participants talked about course design as more than a technical process grounded in dispassionate application of systematic bodies of knowledge. An overarching discourse depicted their work as personal, but not in the sense of being artistic or solely individual. Rather, course design was positioned in a third space, where the work embodied personal commitments about education *and* was an attempt to respond to observed situational needs. Participants developed an interpretive repertoire where they could be ‘themselves’ when they could give concrete shape to their educational commitments, and see themselves responding skillfully to situational work concerns.

A Sense of Purpose

Participants positioned engagement in their work as more than an intellectual exercise; they expressed that they contributed to missions larger than themselves. In Anne’s narrative, she aligned her work and religious ideals, facilitating her framing of being able to do work ‘that’s very strong with me.’ She constructed her development of an online environment for exploring religious heritage as a spiritual calling, providing a discursive justification for her work commitment. Practically, funding from a religious authority enabled the work itself, and Anne’s approach to it, with reported speech used to emphasise this: ‘she... said “dream big.” She used those words. ... I went with that as... permission.’ This practical facilitation was positioned against a deeper obligation, of supporting the ‘[religious] searchers, the wanderers.’ Her discourse was supported through bolstering language that described her purpose as so important, there were no coincidences in her work. It was ‘fortuitous’ that she had formally studied religion before this project, so she understood what was missing in typical, online religious education. This argument produced a sense of investment; she was not just creating a website, but cultivating ‘the uniqueness and dignity of [a] person... for them to see that they are capable of more.’

Matthew and Clare also articulated purpose-driven motives. For Matthew, ‘there always has been this deep purpose’ undergirding his work as a programme chair, promoting ‘access... openness... [and] widening participation’ in HE. He bolstered this personal stake by contrasting his programme’s open enrolment policies with alternative policies of exclusivity, stating that his job ‘feels very different [than] if I... went to some other university,’ where ‘I was just working on online learning,’ but only to a population ‘who have [the right] credentials.’

Clare used purpose-driven language to justify a core assertion that, in teacher training, ‘it’s very important if someone is doing research methods, that they understand research.’ She constructed this mission as not being an imposed obligation, but one she accepted freely, as ‘something I would choose to put work into.’ She pushed back, using defensive rhetoric, against a query about whether the time invested in course design was worth it, saying that no, ‘this is a really core part of Master’s education, and teaching is a core part of my job.’

A Sense of Identity

Participants developed interpretative repertoires where who they were as people and what they cared about were woven into their discourse on work decisions, rationales for courses of action, or what choices were worth making. Statements about ‘themselves’ and descriptions of their work blurred: ‘this whole... project has been a personal thing... when I find myself describing to you the thought processes, I’m actually describing my own philosophy’ (Anne).

Clare positioned teaching as core to her identity; she has ‘always been a teacher,’ using a list to emphasise how she was ‘always thinking about pedagogy, always thinking about assessment... always thinking about [student] engagement and progression and continuity.’ She supported this with extreme case formulations, already seen in her use of ‘always,’ claiming that she’s ‘never not thought about those things [when] doing my... job.’ Clare centred her students’ learning and future as teachers in her course design. When justifying her self-investment in this work, she highlighted student knowledge gaps: ‘if we don’t expose them to those types of research and support their understanding, why would they ever engage in those types of research?’ When discussing course workload, she referred to students’ available time and the need to expend effort to match her work to their capacity: ‘the crucial thing for this group was there was time to engage with content.’ She tied her identity as a teacher, her sense of ‘I-ness’ to the student learning context, a sense of ‘we-ness,’ as when she emphasised that ‘the core readings that I expect [students] to read, I also read as well... to model [for] them.’ The importance of this accountability for student learning was contrasted against a disparaged alternative that emphasised her commitment to her educator identity: ‘if I’m not modeling that, I’m... talking out of both sides of my mouth. ... I have to do [the] reading.’

Anne also considered herself a teacher, and described teaching activities throughout. She also described herself as ‘playful, wonder-filled.’ This attribution of playfulness to her core identity was reflected in what she positioned as valuable in her work and the development of digital artefacts: ‘the principles we wanted to capture... exploration... having a playfulness about the place.’

Matthew constructed ties between his identity and his work as programme chair, often related to work on systems and processes he administered. For example, he contrasted how his emphasised (‘very, very important’) values of timeliness and preparation provided a different type of student experience than is encountered elsewhere: ‘I always felt it was very, very important to try and get everything prepared for the next academic year ahead of time... starting on day one, close to 100% of learning materials [are complete].’ This linking of identity, values and action was set against reported observations of colleagues: ‘on the first day of the year, they had a shell... an introduction’ the implication being that, in contrast to his preparation, others only had a course shell, or an introduction ready.

Staff and Their Work’s Reciprocal Relationships

Participants talked of investing their personhood and available effort in confronting and coping with work challenges. These efforts did not always work out, with other

unexpected events or similar factors positioned as forces that impeded their interests. How they constructed themselves as educational actors in light of challenges illustrates the ways their discourse of concerned involvement in work was actioned.

Coping with Challenges

Matthew constructed his sense of best practice as something rarely achieved, positioning it as desirable but usually not attainable. He developed a narrative where practice never seemed to quite live up to the ideals of online education scholarship, which was framed as not capturing the necessary day-to-day operational work involved in making an online programme ‘happen’:

You can have the online learning design...your instructional design, how you put the materials together...how to teach online... you’re still missing how you make all that [learning] happen.

Within a narrative of challenging work conditions and too-infrequent successes, Matthew proposed that online education best practices did exist, grounded in day-to-day pedagogical and operational practice, and could be shared and explained. Practices were positioned as being ‘not so much in the journals, because... people don’t document that stuff [helpful ideas] in journals.’ Matthew argued that these practices were to be found in networks of colleagues who could provide resources or advice, ‘I see that [helpful ideas] in other places I’ve been, or [in] what people talk about at certain international conferences.’

Anne constructed a similar narrative of resignation tinged with hope. She emphasised her ideals and a belief that those interested in religious searching could be reached by a site with a style attuned to the emotion of spiritual wandering. She positioned her budget, colleagues’ abilities, and the capabilities of available technology as limiting forces: ‘That’s the only disappointment I have.’

One of Anne’s responses to work challenges was to discursively scale back her aims, for example, providing the disclaimer that, even with limitations, ‘I’m happy enough that this is a version of something... this is by no means an end version.’ This future-orientation allowed Anne to cope with limitations as she used present outputs as a proof of concept to secure more interest and funding for her work: ‘It’s just the product that’s being sacrificed,’ ‘I’m not sacrificing the vision.’

Clare constructed a ‘frustrating’ challenge grounded in tension between her university’s claim to be ‘very student supportive’ and her discounting of this, saying that it ultimately rewarded faculty more for scholarship and publications. Teaching and research were set in opposition, with her ‘managing all that... teaching... while... getting emails... saying you need to be publishing in Q1 journals.’ Clare’s response to this challenge, which threatened to limit course design time, through use of offensive rhetoric ‘why wouldn’t I put effort into my teaching? ... This is also very important. This is part of my job.’ Clare’s narrative reinforced her commitment to teaching in the face of this tension. She linked her pushback to the collective identity she shared with other teachers: ‘for lots of teachers, [research] is not the only thing.’ Using more offensive rhetoric, she asserted that action was required to

facilitate spending time on course design, and have that recognised, ‘if they want us to be a student-facing university.... where’s that being reflected [in requirements for promotion]?’

Investing Themselves

Participants constructed a sub-discourse where work realities placed an existential demand on them, whereby they invested ‘themselves’ in the effort of bringing about the ends for which they hoped. They constructed themselves as attempting to ‘do the work’ to better align with what they envisioned, and also talked of allowing themselves to be changed, so they were more capable of responding to challenges.

For Clare, this manifested as an expressed obligation to always be prepared. This was set across her years of teaching and designing courses, with use of extreme case formulations on her commitment to ‘never pick up a slide deck the morning I was teaching,’ meaning reusing the same materials every year. Clare consistently looked at the ‘old stuff [she] had done’ in order that she ‘would just update.’ And then I’m teaching on things I’m researching... I’m a very big fan of... rework, rather than allow it to stagnate.’ This self-investment made her better at presenting materials and facilitated better answering students’ questions, which she emphasised as being important for her online class. ‘I can be... more responsive, because I know the content. I can respond to their very, very specific questions.’

Matthew constructed himself as invested enough to respond to any situational factors, regardless of the personal or professional cost. Using limited resources to ‘emulate something that you need a big, well-resourced team to do’ was presented as his primary driver. He framed hard-won knowledge about how to do this, born out of ‘making it happen... or a small team was making that happen’ despite myriad obstacles, as preparing him to be able to address challenges with ‘how-to’ solutions not available in the field’s conventional research base:

There’s... layers of... contextual factors that... impacted on our ability to do different things...[but] the program [is] still running... students are still pretty happy... the program is still happening... on a yearly basis... We’re still trundling along.

Matthew’s interpretive repertoire for working under constraints was one of taking events one by one, expending necessary effort to solve a problem, before moving on to the next. However, he highlighted a tension between this approach making him look like ‘a magical coordinator,’ and the underlying, unsustainable ‘workload [that existed] in implicit and invisible ways.’ The ‘unsustainable workload’ construction was minimised by positioning it against a narrative of doing work to enable the work of a host of other people (adjunct instructors, support staff, etc.) with aligned approaches to online education. Matthew reflected, ‘the dynamics ... are all very stacked against those part-time people,’ referring to the dynamic of being asked to invest whatever work is necessary to make the system function. ‘But there’s a programme ethos there... that has to come from somewhere,’ with that ‘somewhere’ constructed as being Matthew himself.

Anne's narrative of self-investment often showed in her willingness to perform whatever work was required. Anne referred to herself as metaphorical 'polyfilla,' a type of putty that can be used to fill cracks, a construction of herself as being able to solve any problem:

If someone's.... needed cover... I've covered them... I've worked on most of the degree programs... I kind of teach teaching... in whatever form the current job requires.

Anne identified herself as someone who 'does the work.' This reinforces her self-construction as 'the one' to shepherd the religious education digital environment, and not just because she had initiated it. Since it benefited from having a champion like her, and because she was capable of doing it, she was willing to invest the necessary emotional, physical, and spiritual effort to make it happen. In addition, her discourse was punctuated with her desire to be recognised for this commitment:

What's happened because of this [project] is a validation for me that the way I might see things, which seems normal to me, seems in some way desirable by other people... They can benefit from it.

'Shepherds' or 'Originators' of Work Concepts?

Participants' discourse included a tension within constructions of themselves as online educators. Sometimes, they talked of not being the primary intellectual sources behind accomplishments. Instead, their goal was already part of the world in nascent form, and their work was to draw it out into actuality, instead of creating new ideas, etc. In other cases, they constructed themselves as the primary creative force, emphasising efforts to develop something new.

Anne's construction of work frequently involved pointing outside of herself to how she drew out possibilities the world already contained. She referred to the theological implications of choices her collaborators made without deliberately attempting to include such elements. 'A lot... they had come up with, like the sense of colours... or... the concentricity... has a theological component... they were not aware of.' Anne constructed the meanings the team had 'happened upon' as already part of the world, recognised as important without fully knowing why. She depicted her work, then, as attaching these hidden meanings to collaborators' work, to more fully draw out inherent religious implications: 'they enjoyed... being... enlightened... about some of these things that they were thinking were just visual.'

Despite this aspect of Anne's discourse, she also centred herself as the project's creative influence. She referred to what 'emerged' as the result of 'how I steered the project,' the work as 'my idea,' or emphasising that the creative team gave shape to 'what was in my head.' Anne shifted between these modes of positioning her agency, constructing the world as a place where she cultivated existing possibilities and where she could surface new, valued ideas.

The ‘shepherd’–‘originator’ tension was exemplified by Clare as she described how she selected material to include in her course, alternating between positioning herself as central to the design, with strong use of ‘I’ statements, and referring to external influences on her work. We break a quote into distinct lines in Table 2, illustrating Clare’s movement between the two positions.

Matthew’s discourse offered a third positioning, foregrounding himself as a creative force, with other factors present, but with these as a background condition to which he needed to respond instead of as an already-existing potentiality he was cultivating. This was typified by a comment about his independence as a programme chair, ‘we... ended up running things within our... programmes in different ways based on what we decided to do or what we felt we could do.’ Matthew centred the fact that programmes were run in different ways by actors with the power to bring about conditions they found desirable, while secondarily acknowledging that this was tempered by ‘what we felt we could do.’

Another example of the ‘shepherd’–‘originator’ tension is shown in Matthew’s recounting of his work to reorganise an operating unit he oversaw. While acknowledging colleagues’ efforts in bringing him ideas, Matthew’s portrayal of events centred his capacity to imagine an organisational design and make it real. He talked as if the reorganisation was unfettered, saying that he ‘tore [the unit] up completely,’ and then ‘put things back together.’ The rationale for his decisions was based in his will rather than in external potentialities, that certain changes were based in his judgment, that ‘the thing that was supposed to be getting done didn’t really seem to be getting done...we just said they will do everything for that team.’

Yet, even in the example above, there are also constructions of the ‘background condition’ that Matthew’s design efforts were also influenced by the capacities of the people he organised. This was suggested by his comment that even given his work, it still took time, ‘over 10 years,’ for the team to grow into their nascent potential ‘organically.’ Becoming ‘good at what we wanted to do’ was a matter of him creating the right organisation, true, but it was also a matter of the people then living up to the potential he set up.

Table 2 Analysis of Clare’s alternating self-portraits

Statement	Portrayal of Clare
I played a major decision	Independent, creative force
I am going to do that one [choose a particular article for students to read] because it’s a [current] topic and it’s up to date	Responding to possibilities
I would look at the topic,	Independent, creative force
particularly if it’s something that’s caused a lot of discussion	Responding to possibilities
I’d look at the clarity of the rest of the methodology. If it’s all well-written, it automatically gets put into the pool	Responding to possibilities
I had myself done a study with multiple regression. And I was very happy with the way that methodology had been written	Independent, creative force
So, I was like, I think I can introduce this and just have this as an exemplar	Independent, creative force

Discussion

Two examples illustrate the ‘the lived world of meaningful human activity and possibility’ (Yanchar and Slife 2017: 147) we found in our study. The first was the intertwined character of our participants’ depictions of themselves as both originators and shepherds of ideas, exemplified by Clare’s description of herself as both a creative force as well as responding to outside possibilities her situation presented to her. Neither idea alone adequately captured how she depicted her experience. Instead, she depicted a meshwork (Ingold 2011) of ‘ephemerality, seclusion, and copresence’ (Gourlay 2023: 64). She acted and operated thus in a postdigital space, not in the sense of ‘after’ digital, but ‘more than’ digital. She, Clare, was needed for ideas to come to fruition, resisting claims of technological determinism, the progressive march of innovation, or other framings that place human actors in a secondary position to digital tools.

Our second example comes from Matthew’s attempts to cope with challenges his online programme raised. He alternated between optimism and resignation. In his words, it was ‘very rare’ for a course to meet his expectations, yet he was also confident that whatever move he made next was still worth trying. He worked hard to stay current with the latest instructional design techniques and intentionally attempted to apply them to his work while simultaneously being sceptical they would actually make a difference due to other contextual factors. In these experiences, he may have recognised the failure of the proscribed practices of ‘audit and “reflection”’ which Gourlay (2023) argued are, like canonical presentations of online learning itself, framed as inherently progressive rather than postdigital, twisting, temporary and providing spaces for fugitivity.

In neither Clare nor Matthew, however, do we see an unstable double-mindedness, as if they could not make up their mind about what mattered most. Rather, as Yanchar (2024) argued, we see such ‘lived tensions’ in their depictions of their work as being in some sense fundamental to how they experienced online education. As it is in all human practices, ‘tensions are a significant source of what an agent will experience and what will provide the occasion for [their] acting, reacting, pondering, choosing, strategizing, and striving’ (Yanchar 2024: 8). Understanding how they experienced such tensions, and especially how they navigated them, is fundamental to understanding what it meant to our participants to work in online education along with why this work was desirable to them.

It therefore seems to be a largely futile endeavour to try and categorise our participants as this or that type of actor in the online education space. Was Matthew an online education champion or sceptic? Perhaps both? Or does neither term adequately explain him? At any moment (such as if we were to survey his attitudes) he might have answered in such a way as to appear that he exemplified a certain motive or attitude. But in light of our conversations with him it was equally likely that another day might have prompted a different response to even the same questions. His experience was a living, moving wave, not a static data point.

This has implications for how we understand staff attitudes towards online education more broadly. If we cannot count on stability over time, this should temper our

use of studies of staff perceptions, especially those that, in practice if not in rhetoric, treat staff's attitudes and perceptions as relatively stable constructs (c.f. Johnson et al. 2022). Staff are dynamic beings, always in motion. It does damage to our ability to see them for who they actually are if, in our research, we primarily treat them as data to make a point or prove a claim. They are more than either exemplary cases or cautionary tales, despite our tendency to use them as such. They are more than tools that are useful to the extent they allow us to champion our educational interests.

This does not mean studying staff, or other online education actors like students, is without purpose. Indeed, we hope more studies will take place. But we hope future research will be carried out using methodologies that expose the field to even more of the richness, more of the contradiction, and more of the irreducibility of staff and their experiences than we have been able to articulate here. We offer this study as one attempt towards accomplishing this purpose. Academic staff are not variables for instructional designers, administrators, or others to manipulate towards the ends they want to achieve. They are not tools for them to deploy towards their own goals. Encountering staff in all their complexity should inspire a sense of awe within us, helping us to become more capable of reaching important educational aims, not because we were able to extract problem-solving knowledge out of our participants but because our encounter with them helped us better catch the ennobling vision that we are striving towards (cf. McDonald and Ventura 2025).

Conclusion

In this study, we demonstrated how university staff discursively construct themselves as actors in online educational spaces. Our findings consisted of two participant discourses— involvement in their work existentially mattered to staff, and staff and their work existed in a reciprocal relationship with each other. These further divided into five sub-discourses: (a) their work gave staff a sense of purpose; (b) their work reflected staff's senses of identity; (c) staff coped with challenges that their work raised; (d) staff confronted work realities by investing themselves; and (e) staff navigated tensions between being the 'shepherds' or 'originators' of work concepts. These findings illustrated the central role of staff's constructions in understanding the meaning and purpose of a practice like online education. They also pointed towards the central role of lived tensions—and especially how staff discursively depict their negotiation of tensions—in understanding the work of online education, and how it becomes desirable to those who participate in it.

Who our participants were exceeded our ability to grasp, understand, and articulate. This motivates us to work more carefully and sensitively in understanding them, so we can support them, and others like them, in what they actually need – as opposed to what we want them to need. How could we not respond this way when we heard from staff like Anne that her work was a calling, that she was moved and motivated to support people to better grasp their own 'uniqueness and dignity'? Or from Clare that teaching demanded that she invest her time, her efforts, and also

herself, because her students deserved an education that was ‘responsive... to their very, very specific questions?’

For our participants, online education was more than a job. It mattered because it was an extension of themselves, in difficult to articulate but nonetheless very real ways. This left us with the conviction that our efforts as online educators will be better to the extent that we imitate them not in the sense of reducing what they did to a set of principles for us to apply, but as living examples who can sensitise us towards the craft they were attempting to embody. And thus, we offer them as models to readers, along with an invitation to invest as deeply as they did, finding purpose in necessary tensions and meaning in the possibility of work that reflects one’s values and identity.

Acknowledgements There are no additional acknowledgements.

Author Contribution All authors contributed to the study conception and design. Material preparation, data collection were performed by the first author. Analysis was performed by all authors. The first draft of the manuscript was written by all authors, and all authors commented on previous versions of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Funding Open Access funding provided by the IReL Consortium.

Data Availability Data and material for this study are not available.

Declarations

Ethical Approval All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee (ethical approval number: DCUREC/2024/035) and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Consent for Publication All authors agree with the content and all gave explicit consent to submit.

Competing interests The second and third authors are employed by the university under study.

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