

Variety, apparently it's the spice of life

For all the folk out there in the blogosphere who also work in higher education, let me just say, we made it! It's Friday of week 1 and all that work over the summer months and the craziness of welcome week / freshers week has passed and we can now get back to what we do best, as educators.

For me, this has meant the slightly more frivolous items (like personal development and my blog posts) have had to take a back seat while I concentrated on the real nuts and bolts of getting everyone I work with ready for the new semester and implementing the constant change of learning technology. It didn't mean that I stopped thinking about my blog or the various posts I had intended to write, just that they were thoughts and not actions. But here's the thing, some thinking time is a good thing and because I had thinking time, my thoughts and plans have come together and actually instead of the handful of posts I had intended, those experiences over the summer have brought that together into this one post.

In response to task 5 & 6 from 23things.ed.ac.uk

Diversity

OK hands up, who read that header and sighed and rolled your eyes? It's ok, you are in a safe space, you can admit it here.

I know exactly where you are coming from. The word diversity sparks memories of those three-hour workshops your boss makes you go to, usually with a tutor who has been brought in from some external company to help the company on its mission to meet legal obligations. Right? Oh don't worry, I know... in fact... I used to be that very tutor. So you know, it's ok, I know where you are coming from.

Thing is, I could go into trainer spiel about compliance, triple-A, disability law, the equality act etc but I know you'd glaze over. So instead let me just talk about this summer and how my experiments with emojis and bitmojis fed into the classes I was running over the summer.

I found the specific topic of bitmojis quite difficult to write about, well actually I struggled to think about what I could write about. It just felt like yeah, yeah we all know this stuff, there's nothing new to say here and nothing we write will be without some controversy. It's a hard topic, you just can't put yourself into somebody else's shoes, because those shoes only fit one person. For example, reading about the dilemma caused by having emojis representing ethnic groups and if you should use the emoji which represents your ethnic group or not. That was actually quite a shock to me. I could understand why having an emoji you felt represented you, at last, would be a celebration and why you might decide you want to use it, but genuinely it hadn't occurred to me that using one that didn't represent your ethnic group might cause offence. I was also aware that I could go around and ask people what their experience was and everything one would have a different experience or view. So it wasn't a one size fits all experience. So I've done a lot of thinking about this, which I will admit took me on a bit meandering route. But it led me to an interesting thought... visibility.

In my role, I come across so many students and staff on a daily basis. I don't always know all of them, and I usually don't have a very personal relationship with most of them, but the idea of that celebration of finally having something to digitally represent you when you haven't for so long made me think back to when I was student age. For me, back in the 80s and 90s, I was desperate for any signs of other gay people. Any adult in my life, who had a proper job, was respected and who might possibly be gay, sent me into a frenzy of hope. OMG, maybe it's ok for me to think about being a teacher. Maybe I won't be excluded because I'm gay. etc etc

Now we may seem miles away from the topic of accessibility or emojis and especially where is the learning technology in this? Well, let me put it this way.

This summer, I stood at the front of a classroom 21 times. On almost all of those occasions I was leading a class of new staff, usually much younger than me and almost all of them were very new to education. When I stand in front of that class, I am a very visual representation of an older woman in a technology-driven role. I am a very visual and audible representation of a working-class woman in academia. I am a visual representation of a lesbian in academia and I am usually the first person they have been able to speak to and ask questions of who has the kind of disabilities that we ask them to be aware of when they are using technologies in the university.

This is where my reading of the emoji articles got me thinking. Is that enough? Is it enough that we all exist in all our gorgeous diversity? Because lets face it, the majority of interactions with me will not be face to face, so most people won't know what I look like, what my background is,

usually they won't even hear my accent and mostly they won't be aware that that interaction with me has probably been more draining for me than it has been for them. So can we add another level to this in our digital interactions? And should we?

I gave this a bit of thought and a wee bit of application over the summer and this is what I have done.

Most of my interactions with colleagues are over our email/communications system. So I have added my photo to this. It means when I am in an email conversation, my image pops up so they know who they are dealing with. It also adds my image when they search for me on our internal systems.



Different versions of me people will now see around the university

I've added an image to our VLE as well, in my profile, so now when I add content to courses, message students, put out announcements, bang, they can see my face smiling back at them. I think this one for me is particularly important as I want students, who are mostly young people to be able to see that there are opportunities for them in all sorts of fields and we don't all have to look a certain way, be a certain age or be a specific gender.

Now the biggest change, I have added a voice mail to my phone. Doesn't seem like a big deal huh? Well for me this is, I still, even as a proper grown-up (although that's debatable) I still worry about my accent. I have a strong Glasgow accent, quite noticeably working class and I have had comments.

However, if I was surrounded by people with a variety of accents, some of which were clearly accents I felt were relatable, maybe I'd feel different about my own.

Now that was a very roundabout and quite a wordy blog post to talk about the opportunity to be visible on our digital systems and why we should be. But I think it is very interesting how a thought on emojis has led me down a very interesting path about the importance of there being visual representation of difference and normalising the diversity in our lives in order to reduce some of the crippling societal bonds. Maybe this might just be a way to tackle things like imposter syndrome in academia. Understandings of each other and maybe, you never know, but maybe it might even have an impact on artificial intelligence, algorithms and things like facial recognition and the experiences of people who don't look like the software programmer.

Ok so maybe I am reaching here, but let me ask you, how many of you have a picture on your staff profile? I know of at least three people who have put pictures of their dogs as their staff profile picture. Maybe... it's time to be brave and get out there to the front line.

Be visible in all your diverse glory.

Some interesting reading

Brown, N. and Leigh, J. (2018), "Ableism in academia: where are the disabled and ill academics?", *Disability & Society*, Routledge, Vol. 33 No. 6, pp. 985–989.

Byrne, G. (2019), "Individual weakness to collective strength: (Re)creating the self as a 'working-class academic'", *Journal of Writing in Creative Practice*, Vol. 12 No. 1-2, pp. 131–150

Dar, S. and Salmon, U. (2019), "Inside the Ivory Tower: Narratives of Women of Colour Surviving and Thriving in British Academia edited by Deborah Gabriel and Shirley Ann Tate. London, UK: Trentham Books/I0E Press, 2017, 164 pp., £24.36, ISBN 10-185856848X, ISBN 13-978-185856848", *Gender, Work, and Organization*, academia.edu, Vol. 26 No. 1, pp. 64–67.

National Center for Institutional Diversity. (2018), "The Power of Academic Role Models 'Like Me'", *Medium*, Spark: Elevating Scholarship on Social Issues, 23 March, available at:

<https://medium.com/national-center-for-institutional-diversity/the-power-of-academic-role-models-like-me-7f4f2c59279d> (accessed 20 September 2019).

"Role model being yourself: sexual orientation and the workplace". (n.d.). <https://www.stonewall.org/>, available at:

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