

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.uk/>, available at:

https://www.stonewall.org.uk/sites/default/files/role_models.pdf.

Today's "thing": I'm reflecting on information security and my smartphone

I've been spending a while between these last few blog posts for my digital capabilities adventure because I wanted to take some proper time to reflect on things. A lot of what's involved in this project are things I interact with and discuss every day, so it's easy for me to just bring out the everyday chat without actually thinking a new. So I thought I might approach this post a little differently, from the perspective of someone who is in the position of feeling overwhelmed and under educated on the subject of device security. I say device because really this affects a lot more than my smart phone.

In general, I consider myself to be "ok with tech". I absolutely do not consider myself to be a techie or in anyway an IT whizz. In fact I am constantly telling folk at work that I am not an IT Bod, I don't work in IT because I don't want to set unreasonable expectations of my capabilities. I would describe myself as an "end user" who likes gadgets. A few years ago I would have said I was pretty confident about looking after security, permission etc on my devices but a change happened and now, I feel that I have no control or knowledge of my devices in that regard.

What happened?

I switched operating systems. I moved into a new job and that

job required me to move from windows to apple operating systems and I felt completely lost. That was three years ago and I still feel completely lost.

I switched from windows computers and android phone and tablet to apple computer and apple phone and now apple tablet. It was a mountain to climb, I don't mind admitting. However, what it did, was force me to stop and think, rather than run on autopilot. I had to do a lot of internet searching and reading to work out what on earth was going on.

So hence why I said I was approaching this blog post from the perspective of someone who was completely overwhelmed by tech.

It started with...

It all started with my phone. Having to learn to use an iPhone was one thing, but when it came to working out why my battery was dying so quickly that internet searching made me realise how much of the phone was giving access to apps etc that I knew nothing about. Sending data and using location software which was all draining the battery but that I hadn't realised were running in the background.

I have since gone through and limited this to things I want to access stuff but it made me realised how much of our privacy and security is taken for granted by these big companies. My iphone, straight from the box was automatically sending:

- Analytics info to apple. I had to switch this off rather

than switch it on.

- Analytics from iCloud was automatically being sent to apple, again I had to switch this off rather than agree to it up front.
- Location settings were allowing me to be tracked, again something you need to go in and switch off.

To be realistic, this probably sounds like a really big deal when in fact you can go in and turn these off but it's something you need to be aware of before you will know to turn them off and it isn't just an apple thing, all the big companies are doing this.

So, go have a check at what is being shared, given access, recorded etc. It's always good to expand your knowledge, right? ☐

Digital footprint – what info of yours is public

I do a lot of work with students about creating their online presence, especially senior year students who are about to go off into the world and begin life as freelance artists and practitioners. One of the first things I do, before we get onto the fun tasks of building websites and social media feeds is to take a look at their digital footprint or a I call it, their online brand.

I was inspired to write a blog post about this as part of my digital capabilities adventure with [23 things](#) so feel free to go off and take a look at that and see if it inspires you.

Digital footprint – what on earth is that?

So let's start at the beginning of class, what the heck is a digital footprint? You'll kick yourself cause it really is a simple and obvious one when you know – your digital footprint is basically all the traces of you which you leave behind online. So all those old social media accounts you no longer use but didn't deactivate and delete? The forums where you once went to comment on poor customer service. Or how about the work photo of you that you hate but your boss insists on having on the company website?

All of this and more are the digital traces of you online and it's easy to find info that people will use to find out about you and possibly make judgements on you.

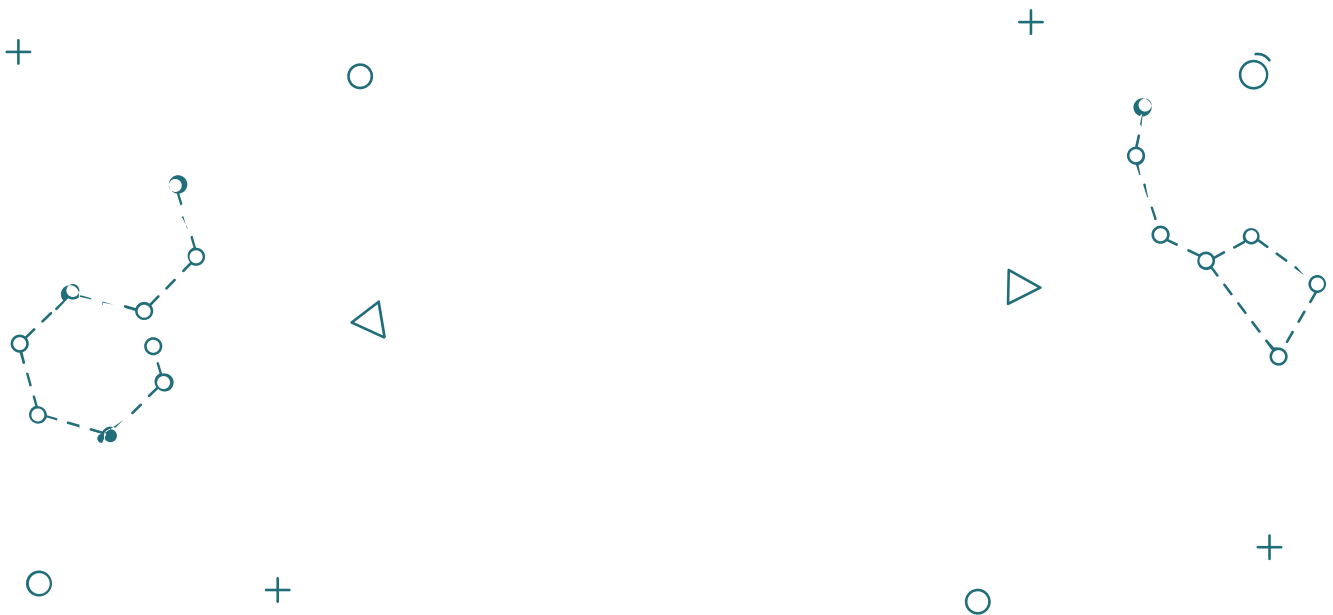
About me

So here is a simple and relatively quick way you can find out what your digital footprint looks like. Google yourself.

Yeah I know, but seriously, no egos here, go google yourself and see what comes up, not just the first page either, keep

going.

So here is what comes up when I google me.



Now I've been through this process a few times so there's nothing that shocks me, but a few things to be aware of. My hobby blog comes up on the same page as my work profiles and blog. So something to consider, do you want these things linked in your digital footprint? If not, you might want to consider not using the same names etc for both.

Also, images... I bet you didn't think of that did you? Do you want the same image of you for both types of things? It means at least visibly they are linked. Also, what images come up, are you happy with them?

For me, there are a lot of images of me and by me which appear in a search, probably due to the fact that I am a blogger, youtuber and a photographer, but this is something I like to

make the students aware of, do you want that drunken night out photo of you appearing when someone googles you for a job? Now here is a wee interesting twist on this same task. Do the same thing again, have a search but use a different search engine. See what comes up then? You will probably be surprised to find that the different search engines pick things up in different ways.

This is a really basic and easy way to begin making students aware of their digital footprint and how important it is to think about the image you are creating of yourself online. For my students, their online presence is their online brand so it's really important to them that they are showing the professional side that they want to be seen (professional is in context).

You might be thinking yeah but I don't need an online presence, this isn't important to me and you might be right, but it doesn't do any harm for you to be aware of this. Sometimes something appears online you weren't expecting. One example I have is of a student who found his full name and address appear online because of something someone else posted. Just be aware.

So there is something else to consider, it may not be as clean cut about the image of yourself you portray, but what about info you maybe don't want out there on the web. Does your facebook page show up in a search? In which case, can you click on it and see all the posts you've shared, liked etc? Are you happy that these are public?

What about you Eli, are you happy with your online presence?

Ah ha! Sneaky way for me to raise another thing to think about. My online presence is carefully created. It may not look like it, but I have made deliberate decisions about the directions people travel in when lost in my digital footprint. Let me explain.

My hobby blog is full of people who are interested in cooking or gardening etc. I also have a twitter account that I use for it. However, I didn't have a separate twitter account for work or study things so gradually, my personal / blog twitter account became full of people who wanted to connect with me for digital education reasons. Not what my blog followers were interested in so it became a bit of a muddy puddle.

I chose then to make a very obvious distinction between my hobby twitter feed and my work life one. I created a separate account for digital education Eli and named in a very obvious way (LearningTechEli).

Now I mentioned different directions? Sometimes people who know me as LearningTechEli might also be interested in gardening etc so I have left breadcrumbs so they can, if they choose, go over to the twitter feed or blog for my hobbies and vice versa. I've made it so the option is there to "co-mingle" but I've made it so that it has to be a deliberate choice for that person to do rather than they get lost in a mass of nonsense that they didn't come to see. That way people get a choice of the types of waffle by Eli that they read and the version of Eli online that they are interested in.

This is all how I work with my digital footprint, it is by no means the only or correct way to do things. After all, I know plenty of people who keep everything together as one, because to them, you take all of them or none of them and they don't want to separate their work online fun with their general "things that are important to them" online fun. ☐ And you know what, that's ok cause they have made that conscious decision.

So have a google and a think about what you find. Are you happy or is it time to make some changes?

My digital capabilities adventure continues – thing 1 & 2: social media

So it's a rainy Sunday afternoon, my mocha has somehow mysteriously evaporated and my wife is ignoring me for an afternoon with Assassin's Creed. I think that means it's the perfect time for me to write my first official blog post on my digital capabilities adventure with [23 things](#).

The task at hand for week 1 and 2 is to write a short blog post about my aspirations for this journey and to think about the social media guidelines for my company.

Personal objectives

I've been watching the various cycles of the 23 things events for the past few years and always thought it sounded like something fun to do, but never quite managed to feel like I could justify the time work wise for something which was clearly just a bit of fun and not proper work. Sound familiar to anyone? However, I'm at that stage now where I've realized that I can't just be serious and straight laced all the time, it eats away at your smile. So lets break out the fun!

OK I'm being a bit silly but there is a serious message there, I watch gamification and learning through play etc etc being discussed and events being run at work all the time, but it's not something I could claim I "get". By that I mean, I'm not sure I understand what constitutes play in a higher education, learning environment and more so I don't understand 100% how it works. I always use the lego example cause I haven't yet managed to grasp how building stuff with lego can help you to learn (in certain subjects, topics etc).

So there is my first thing, I want to treat something academic related in a playful manner in the hope that it will help me conceptualists the playful learning thing a bit better.

My second aspiration is a bit simpler, I already know I have a knowledge gap around attribution, licensing and digital content so I'm using this experience as scaffolding to help me develop better habits around this area. So just now it's about making sure I tag photos etc when I do these posts, I plan to move that further into a bit of a tidy up and correction of these glaring mistakes in previous posts and then take that

out into my personal blog, which would be a huge task so not one for straight away.

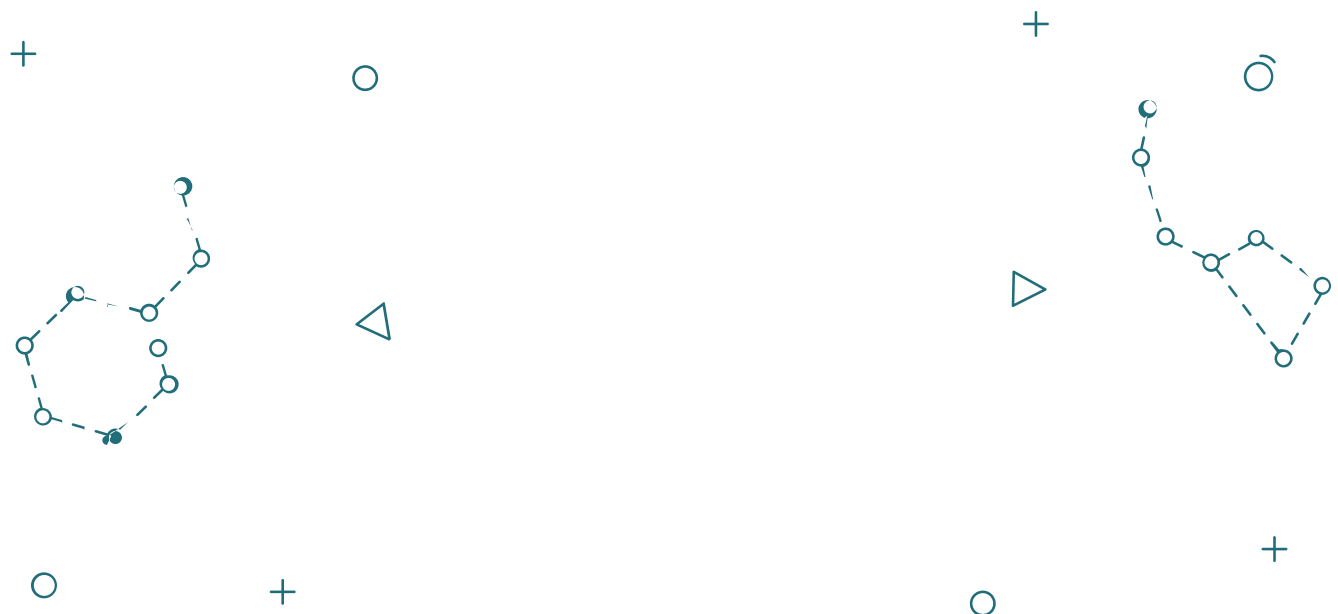
I know this list of aspirations will grow as I progress, because the more you learn, the more you understand that the gaps are bigger than you realized.

Social media guidelines

The task asked if I was aware of the guidelines and my opinions. So here we have a conundrum. Yes I was aware of the company social media guidelines as I have worked and still work with social media for my role. Part of those guidelines are all about being aware of how your social media use reflects on the company, which I understand and to a degree I agree with especially if you are using social media for a purpose as part of your job.

Where I don't agree with is ... no wait. Am I allowed to say that on social media? Big brother might be watching. *chuckle*

I think then that the best social media guidelines might be as simple as Wheaton's law.



A place where learning happens, pedagogy and a construct: studio

When you work in learning and teaching, it's bread and butter to discuss pedagogy over coffee at least once a week (maybe that should be scone and butter then), but when you work in learning and teaching in an art college, that conversation usually confuses the hell out of people. But really it shouldn't. There isn't anything super mysterious about the way teaching happens in most art subjects, you've just probably never heard it named this way.

So what is studio?

I suppose the first thing that comes to mind when people hear the term studio, especially in relation to art and design, is the physical place. Which is absolutely correct. The studio is the place where learning happens, where students work, socialize, support each other and where their tutor provides feedback to help them improve.

It dates way back, in fact historically, we can go back to the Middle Ages and the term Atelier. This was the term used to describe the situation of the workshop or studio of a professional artist where the one master or principle artist worked together with a number of students or apprentices to create fine art.

“Ok Eli that’s simple enough, we all know this.”

Well yup, but the confusion happens when we start to talk about studio as pedagogy, as a method for teaching. That’s usually where the coffee conversation starts to dry up.

The physical studio may look different in different disciplines

But why a pedagogy?

A signature pedagogy is “the classroom moments reflecting the

discipline's way of thinking, knowing, doing and feeling" (Motley et al., 2016:224). For art & design teaching, studio is the signature pedagogy in use. They are epistemological and ontological but for art practitioners, they are also axiological. Artists, as we heard about in the atelier model, haven't just learned about a subject, they live the life of that subject matter. The philosophy of what it is to be an artist is embedded into teaching. Artists value collaborative and cooperative ways of working. They learn from each other. This is an integral part of teaching in art and design, the teaching of tacit and explicit knowledge through modelling practice. The tutor doesn't just embody the practice in a physical sense, but the insider language and culture used and developed amongst practitioners. If you like, we could use the simple terminology of preparing the student for actual life as an artist as opposed to teaching them about it.

Expression is never solely of one art alone. That is, when we practice an art, such as glassblowing, we express more than the practice of glassblowing itself: we express an entire history of learned corporeal knowledges. (O'Connor, 2007: 113).

I suppose this is a good point to mention that although we are talking in general terms about studio teaching, it's good to remember that throughout the entirety of art and design, there are also discipline-specific practices.

Setting wicked problems

One great example of modelling practise is the setting of wicked problems. Design studio teaching forms around project briefs and problem setting, usually problems that are grounded in the realities of professional practice. The tutor sets a project brief which usually has an ill-defined problem that the students need to address, the answer the students seek may change as the student grapples with solving the problem. The students work on these projects in the studio, both alone, but with their classmate working on their solutions around them, and collaboratively with their classmates as a peer learning and support network. Throughout their time working on the project, tutors will provide feedback and guidance. At various points throughout the year, the students will present their work to the tutors, professional practitioners and their classmates for “critique (crit) sessions” intended to stimulate reflection on and discovery of their learning through reviews and student questioning.

So just a quick hurl around the concept of studio, it is such an amazingly interesting and intricate concept that I could easily write all day but maybe for the purpose of a wee blog post, this is enough. Feel free to come grab a coffee with me and chat more though.

O'Connor E, (2007) The centripetal force of expression: Drawing embodied histories into glassblowing. *Qualitative Sociology Review* 3(3): 113–134.

Motley P, Chick NL and Hipchen E, (2016) A conversation about critique as a signature pedagogy in the Arts and Humanities. *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 16(3): 223–228.

Life list, bucket list, it doesn't matter so much what you call it, more that it motivates you.

How many times have you said, “Oh I'd love to try...” or “I'd love to visit...” or “I wish I could learn...”? Well a life list is a nudge in the direction of achieving these things.

A life list or some people say bucket list) or wish list is simply a list of all the things you'd like to achieve, and writing them down in a list is a way to gather these thoughts and encourage you to begin making things happen rather than just wishing your life away.

I wrote my life list just before my 30th birthday when I suddenly realised that I hadn't done any of the things I had assumed I would have done, before turning thirty (at 29, 30 seems like some sort of huge mile stone).

So now I am beginning to achieve and experience these things and I'm still adding more to my list. My list is really

varied, all different experiences in their own right and all for different reasons and sometimes, one experience leads to another. For example; through studying Gaelic, I then learned about a Gaelic college on the Isle of Skye, instantly I thought, I want to go there and spend time in a Gaelic speaking environment to help my confidence and ability at the spoken word.

The list

Big Ones

Go to a TED conference	
Get a university degree	X
Run 10k	X
Cycle from Glasgow to Edinburgh	X
Be placed in a beer competition	X
Win a gold in a beer competition	X

Travel based goals

Visit New England	
Spend the holidays in a snowy country	
Renew my passport	X
Order a meal in another language in the relevant country	

Education Based Goals

Learn another language	X
Go to Sabhal Mor Ostaig	X
Learn to drive	X
Learn to make cool silver jewelry	
Learn to cook Thai Green Curry (from scratch)	X
Learn to make pesto (from scratch)	X
Learn to make bread	X
Learn to snowboard	X

Do the World's Coolest Activities

Snowboard on a mountain	
Go microlighting	X
Go paintballing	X
Bunjee Jump	
Snorkel/scuba and see tropical fish	

Events I wanna go to

Beltain (The Fire festival)	X
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New York Pride	
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People I wanna Meet

Meet Steven Fry	X
Meet Bill Gates	
Meet Tom Kuhlmann	X

Just To Make Life Interesting

Grow my own veggies	X
BBQ on the beach	
Skinny dip	
Learn to shoot a hand gun	

It's just a jump to the left....a quick introduction to my current research

project

I'm taking a bit of a detour today to talk about some research I'm currently wrestling with. It seems to constantly be at the front of my thoughts and I see it rear its head at every opportunity so seems fitting that I share it here too.

The short blurb for this is I am currently researching "teaching presence" (that's the very simplistic way to describe it, and when I started this project I really thought it was going to be that simple but I have taken so many twists and kinks along the way that at one point I wasn't even sure I was going to get the answers I was looking for and if I should even carry on. I'm glad to say that perseverance won out and I'm back on track.

Let me explain.

Teaching presence, that concept of how a teacher makes their presence felt rather than just seen. Sounds simple enough? Or maybe you are thinking "really Eli, but the whole thing is that you can see the teacher in the classroom so why would you even discuss this in terms of teaching presence being felt?" And that's ok, I think that is a completely legitimate question to ask. So lets break down my thoughts around this project a bit.

Teachers come in many different shapes and sizes, as the phrase goes, some teach in a classroom with 30 students or less, some teach in a lecture theatre with 500 student, some do lots of one on one time, for some there are too many

students to offer that service so need to focus on one to many. Then you have the teachers who teach online, where technically, they aren't there at all. So what are the factors that connect teaching presence with all these different teachers?

I wanted to look into this for practical purposes, I'm interested in online teaching (different from learning) and specifically I want to look into how teachers can take their experience and skills from one type of teaching (in a classroom or studio specifically) and then use this to create equal feelings of the teacher and presence in an online course.

There are two ways to look at this, you can view the perspective of the student, how does the student perceive the teacher, the teaching and their experience of both and this is probably the most common way that this has been investigated. However, I am really interested in the other way, to look at the teacher and what is their perception. I think this could make for some really interesting findings. For instance, how does a teacher perceive their identity as a teacher? What makes them say the label "teacher" fits? Again as an example, if very simplistically we talk about the teacher feeling like a teacher when they stand at the front of the class and teach their students. It could be the act of being in front of the class, or the interaction or response from their students. Maybe it's seeing the student wrestle with a problem and then overcome it.

So now if we take that teacher out of their usual classroom and stand them in an empty room with only a video camera in front of them and ask them to teach... Can you see where I am going with this? If there are no students visibly present,

what cues are there that your message is getting across?

In turn this idea of visual or felt presence as why opens up to investigation into how. Are there set things a teacher does that creates presence, if there is, do all teachers do them or do them all, do teachers do different things depending on environment, class size etc? And what happens when you change on of the factors that determine the how?

It's all very interesting and could take so many paths. I'm starting with the basic concept of teaching... lets find out the why and how and I'll update you all on my findings, I promise.

I'm taking a bit of a detour today to talk about some research I'm currently wrestling with. It is taking up most of my life at the moment so seems fitting that I share.

The short blurb for this is I am currently researching "teaching presence", and when I started this project I really thought it was going to be that direct but I have taken so many twists and kinks along the way that at one point I wasn't even sure I was going to get the answers I was looking for.

Let me explain.

Teaching presence, that concept of how a teacher makes their presence felt rather than just seen. Sounds simple enough? (You might have heard of this in connection with the [Community of inquiry framework](#) (COI)). Ok lets add in that the teacher is teaching online, so now how does this fare, the teacher is (technically) not "there" nor are the students because

synchronicity is varied. So what is “thereness”? What actually is presence come to think of it? Should I have said that the teacher was “not” there?

I started out thinking the COI framework would be a great way to look at this, especially since it was written with online in mind, but when you work in an art college you very quickly realised things might not be that simple. So my research took a bit of a kink and became much more about how teachers create teaching presence in an online course, with the added twist of studio teaching. I’m very early days yet so I’m currently basking in the fun of having lots of questions I get to investigate and try to find answers to but I promise I’ll keep you up to date and share any good discoveries and conundrums along the way.

Sage advice in a blogging chat – and it didn’t come from the garden blogger

I am very happy to say the crisis is over. Although lets be honest, the shape of the world right now means I have no right to use the word crisis when I talk about something as trivial as not writing a blog post. Sheesh! Perspective, right? Let’s instead refer to this as a momentary lack of fun! Which has been fixed!

But hey ho, all I mean is that the fact that I am now putting

pen to paper (or fingers to keyboard) means I am once again enjoying the experience of sharing my thoughts and feelings with the world at large through this blog. Let me catch you up. If you are just joining us... I had writers' block, well let's be more correct about this, I thought I had writers' block. I thought there was a huge drama happening because I couldn't think of anything to write about. But some very sensible and useful advice from other bloggers yesterday reminded me that actually, I don't have to write at all.

The advice went something like this...

write if you have something to say

Sometimes things are only obvious when they slap you upside the head ☐

See, this all came about cause I had a seriously fun morning yesterday chatting with [James Lamb](#), [Lorna Campbell](#) and [Karen Howie](#) about blogging and the how's and why of our blogging lives. A fantastic morning where the pastries were actually the least exciting part (oh but that was a lovely almond croissant).

I don't want to give too much away and ruin things just yet, so I'll leave it there with only this. Keep an eye on the teaching matters podcasts for some fun with blogging and I'll chat more when it's live. If I have something to say about it, of course.

Formative assessments are pointless

I work in a school (in a university) which uses formative assessment, a lot. Almost every course we run has an assessment part of the way through the year where students receive feedback but no grade, but I am fully aware that to others this seems crazy and I've even heard, a waste of time. Even from a student's perspective I've heard of complaints that an assignment with no grade is pointless (see what I did there) and they are too busy to waste time on such thing.

I disagree and here is why.

A good formative assessment is not a stand alone thing which has no purpose. It is part of the learning experience of your students and should offer them an opportunity to assess their learning, see where they have knowledge gaps and gain feedback and insight. Where formative assessment is pointless, is when it isn't part of the whole and doesn't feed into the students learning in a meaningful way. Let me explain.

Part way through the semester students submit an assessment. It is formative, they will receive no grade. However what this does is give them a chance to write an essay (or other form of

assessment) on the course material they have learned so far which doesn't have the pressure and the high stakes of feeding directly into a grade, which for a student who doesn't feel like "they quite get it yet" is much less stressful.

It gives an opportunity to to get feedback which will guide them in the areas where they may be weaker and therefore a chance for them to get stronger, crucially, before it's time to submit a graded assignment. Also in some cases, they gain an opportunity to practice submitting an assignment. It could be practice at formatting a document, submitting to an electronic system or using a new tool to create materials. Either way they get a practice run again without the high stakes pressure of things affecting their final grade.

Now feedback doesn't only come from the course teacher, feedback can also come from peers and experience (maybe of submitting to said system etc). But when this really comes into it's own is when the feedback is feedforward (I know lots of you hate this word but it really is the best way for me to describe what I mean), when the feedback directly relates to how to improve so that your summative grade is better than it could have been. This I think is a crucial element of feedback. Feedback must come at a time when it can be acted upon so that it can make a difference. Feedback in week 12 after the assignments are submitted and the course is complete is a bit like the old bullseye catchphrase, "look at what you could have won".

Lastly, I know all too well that there is a feeling that students don't bother reading feedback, so why then should we bother. Well, maybe we need to address why student are not reading feedback and see if we can rectify this? Are we actually closing the loop on feedback? Are we saying here is

feedback now go action it, then checking and saying, show me how you have auctioned this feedback?

Do students understand the benefits of taking part in a formative assignment, even though it will not directly feed a grade into their course?

Sometimes believe it or not, student don't actually understand what we think is obvious. They just feel time poor, especially since they are usually studying multiple courses each semester, and they may not be able to make the connection between opportunities to improve their work and that final grades that seems so far off from now.

Have a think about this when you are in the course design phase of your next course and see if you can actively design in opportunities for formative assessment.

Why do I blog? Time for some reflection.

I have been asked to take part in a podcast about blogging and normally I'd be very up for this and could, to be honest, chat the legs of a donkey. However, I'm being asked to chat about my professional blogging practice, namely this blog. This puts me in a bit of a pickle as to be honest, this isn't "my blog", and don't get me wrong, obviously this is my blog, it's me who

writes it, but I actually have a lifestyle blog which is quite successful and I have built a community around that over the past ten years. I consider that “my blog”. I consider this one, something I do for work.

So I am now trying to think about my blog (for work), why I blog, what I am trying to achieve and it’s quite daunting. I don’t think I have EVER actually thought about it.

So, a wee cup of earl grey and a treat to get the brain working and time for some reflection.

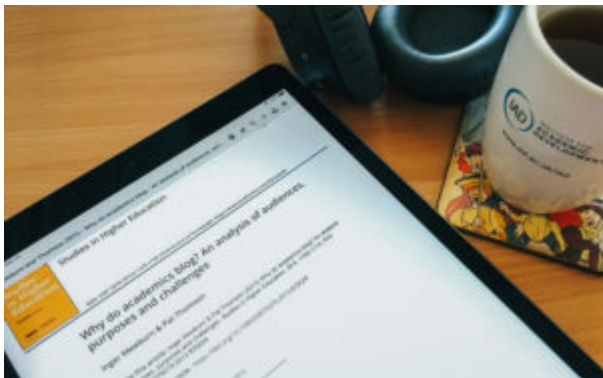


Photo by: Eli Appleby-Donald 2019

How did this blog start?

Apparently (some famous nun said) the beginning is a very good place to start, so let’s go back to the beginning.

Well, a while back, I started a blog which became this one. I started a site called The New College Technologist, as at that time this was my professional identity. I looked after all academic tech related things for New College and I wanted a platform to put my thoughts and ideas out on so that people

could find out about things I was interested in, implementing at the school or that I was championing. I wanted a way for people to choose to find out more, rather than me invading their email inboxes. So the New College Technologist blog was born and I was quite a regular blogger, but then I changed jobs and more importantly schools and I stopped being the New College Technologist. My new boss was quite keen that I keep the digital footprint I'd built so Edutechie was born.



photo by: Paul Dodds 2015 <https://www.pauldodds.com/>

But why keep it going?

See this is where reflection is awesome, just telling you about the origins of this blog has opened the flood gates to thought.

My purpose, why then, if I was no longer trying to give my colleagues at New College news and info, did I keep going with blogging? Different audience, different purpose?

I guess it comes down to digital footprint. Although the purpose of this blog changed from delivering info, to me having a space to talk about educational technology, it was still about me having a place to think, to talk, to share my thoughts and opinions. It was about my existence in a much

bigger pond. I now feel that I'm being a complete ego maniac, but it's the truth, I wanted other people to know about the things I thought were important without the need to spend months on a paper for a journal. I wanted people to have alternative opinions of educational technology available to them so that they could make informed choices. After all not all learning tech types think the same things, do the same stuff, even those of us who work for the same organisation have differing opinions. So it's good for all that to be visible and for me, the digital medium just feels right. Not for any clever reason tied into my role, but just because the internet and technology gave me a voice when I didn't have one. I find social media and digital media in general comfortable. I would happily do so much more in the way of digital media for communication if I had the time. I happily create video and manage a twitter feed, so blogging is just another natural element of that to me.



Photo by Eli Appleby-Donald 2017

I also wanted a much more relaxed approach to being part of my academic community and this fit. Again I like that it's something people can choose to read and be part of, no-one is being pressured which for me is important. I feel all too

often that my job as an educational technologist is to “encourage” people to use certain tools or do things a certain way and I’m not always comfortable with that. I prefer to give people info and chat to them and be a part in their personal decision making process. This is much more me, a support and guide in the wings who is happy to say “ok this isn’t for you, so how can I help you make a success of the thing that is?”

Am I happy with the result?

Ha ha ha, oh this is a goodie, see my “other blog” has a huge community who contacted me on a daily basis. It even spawned a youtube channel which is growing steadily. I am very aware of stats for both. I regularly check and I have rules about how I engage with the community. Which sounds crazy to me now when I say it out loud (or type it online) because this was never its purpose in the beginning. This blog, however, my work one doesn’t have a community, it has readers, I know because I see the stats, but I haven’t actually engaged with promoting it or encouraging feedback. Should I? I’m not sure. Is that what I want? Again, I’m not sure. I guess I won’t know unless I allow things to happen organically and judge from there.

I feel very much that this blog is in its infancy. I’m not sure yet what my voice here is, should I be reflecting? Explaining? Discussing? I just don’t know and I guess time will help me to find that meaning here. At the moment, it’s an outlet for me, a way for me to write, to communicate in something longer than a tweet.

So as results go, I’m not sure there is anything I can measure yet. I’m not even sure if I should, if I measure will it

become something I feel is a chore, something I have to do? Or will I continue to just find solace in speaking to the void knowing that somewhere there is another soul who is happy to passively be part of an invisible community of two?

My other blog: <http://www.eliapplebydonald.co.uk/blog/>

My professional twitter identity: [@LearningTechEli](https://twitter.com/LearningTechEli)

Other places on the web you may see the Edutechie:

- <http://www.teaching-matters-blog.ed.ac.uk/using-online-teaching-aids-to-support-studio-teaching-in-the-creative-arts/>
- <http://www.teaching-matters-blog.ed.ac.uk/does-lecture-capture-enhance-learning/>
- <https://www.ed.ac.uk/alumni/services/staff-spotlight/eli-appleby-donald>