Running a successful academic blog can make you feel like a rock star: authenticity and narrative are essential for forging your own digital identity

by Blog Admin   August 15, 2011

Many PhD students are turning to blogs and social media for tips on writing a thesis. Running one such blog, **Inger Mewburn** *of* **The Thesis Whisperer** *writes that determining your online identity, the authenticity of your voice and setting the correct narrative tone are all key to striking a chord with your audience and engaging in a very valuable research community.*

I recently attended a workshop on career development put on by RMIT University, where I am a Research Fellow in the School of Graduate Research. The room was full of people like me – academics who had finished their PhD sometime in the last five years, all wondering how to get hold of money to do more research. During the session, someone told the room that I ran a blog for PhD students. A person at my table turned to me with shock and said: "Oh – YOU are *The Thesis Whisperer*? I love your blog!" I felt like a rock star. It's a disconcerting and yet strangely pleasurable feeling I am slowly getting used to.

The blog, *The Thesis Whisperer*, invites people to talk about the experience of doing a PhD and share their knowledge with others. I am not interested in PhD topics, but in the people who are doing them and how they manage the process of getting a degree from start to finish and beyond.

Social media expert?
Through blogging I seem to have become a de-facto 'social media expert', both in my university and beyond. I don't think of myself as such, perhaps because I know people who are doing PhDs on social media and are genuine experts. Academics frequently ask me what topics they should write about and which software tools to use to start doing this 'internet thing' that everyone is talking about. These people might be surprised that my tools are post-structuralist thought and Actor Network Theory, and I don't have a topic, just a sensibility. But this philosophical approach can be hard to articulate, so instead I ask a few short questions:

- Who are you?

- What stories have you got to tell?

- How do you want to tell these stories?

If you understand your identity and create a strong, authentic narrative about yourself it is easier to find and connect with your audience. Let me explain further, using myself as an example.

What is this thing called 'digital identity'? on Prezi

Projecting your academic self
Everyone has multiple identities; all of them together make up who we are. I am a wife, mother, sister, daughter, aunty, academic (teacher and researcher), officemate, knitter, cyclist, citizen, ex-architect… and more. The role I play at any given time depends on where I am and who I am with. So the question I posed myself when I started my 'internet thing' was this: which role do I want to play on the internet? The internet, if we can imagine it as a place, is more like being on television or shouting in a city square. If I ever did get on television I would want to project my best, most composed self – my academic self.

Authenticity matters
If I am to play my academic self on the internet, I want that self to be authentic. To be authentic, all my

actions on the internet matter because collectively they tell the story of me. What I say and do, across multiple platforms and in face to face situations, combine to create a sense of presence others can feel. Therefore the way I run my twitter account should be consistent with the way I speak on my blog and reflect my academic character.

Collaboration over competition
I like to think I am a thoughtful academic, but not always a brilliant one. I often use humour to get my point across and will always prefer a well chosen story to a statistic. I'm an idealist. I believe in the university as an abstract concept; as a place where the best part of human instinct can be channelled productively (but I am awake to – even fascinated by – its failings). I prefer collaboration over competition. I try to be humble rather than arrogant. I try to remember that having a PhD means you still have things to learn. Therefore I don't want to be the only voice telling the story – I don't have all the answers which will get someone through a PhD. So I called the blog THE *Thesis Whisperer* very deliberately. I always imagined this blog as a newspaper which myself and other people could write for and PhD students and supervisors would like to read. I am grateful for the growing number of people who see what I am trying to do and want to write for the Thesis Whisperer in that spirit.

The Thesis Whisperer blog has struck a chord with the audience, I think, because there are so many other people talking, both in the posts and through the comments. Listening to other people helps us learn. I have learned most of what I know about writing from books, but I have learned how to put it into practice over coffees with other writers who tell me how they do it. *The Thesis Whisperer* is full of this kind of information; the sort we normally exchange informally in corridors, in kitchens and while sitting in classrooms waiting for the lecture to start. This kind of knowledge is extremely helpful, but hard to find because you have to know the right people. The internet gives you access to these people in an unprecedented way.

Your aspirations might be entirely different to mine, but I still think identity, authenticity and narrative will matter. So, if you want to 'do the internet thing', I invite you to tell your own story and get in touch via @thesiswhisperer.

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