The Way Digitized Lectures and Film Presence Coaching Impact Academic Identity: An Expert Facilitated Participatory Action Research Case Study

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Abstract—This paper explores the concept of academic identity as it relates to the lecture, in particular, the digitized lecture delivered to a camera, in the absence of a student audience. Many academics have the performance aspect of the role thrust upon them with little or no training. For the purpose of this study, we look at the performance of the academic identity and examine tailored film presence coaching for its contributions toward academic identity, specifically in relation to feelings of self-confidence and diminishment of discomfort or stage fright. The case is articulated through the lens of scholar-practitioners, using expert facilitated participatory action research. It demonstrates in our sample of experienced academics, all reported some feelings of uncertainty about presenting lectures to camera prior to coaching. We share how power poses and reframing fear, produced improvements in the ease and competency of all participants. We share exactly how this insight could be adapted for self-coaching by any academic when called to present to a camera and consider the relationship between this and academic identity.

Keywords—Academic identity, embodied learning, digitized lecture, performance coaching.

I. INTRODUCTION

THE higher education sector is in a state of flux. The teaching and learning environment is constantly evolving. Higher education's pursuit of measurable economic outcomes and corporate growth can in some contexts lead to behavior in which human understandings frequently referred to in academic endeavor such as 'gut feel', 'inner knowing', and 'insight gained through talking with students' are diminished by an overpowering focus on gauging success through measurements and metrics. Academics are expected to do more, produce more, teach more students in more and varying modalities [12], [25], [36], [37]. In this context, the delivery of a lecture by an academic can be considered a performance act; as well as the lecture being delivered, the lecturer is giving an invisible performance *at the lectern* and/or *in front of the camera* that is their evolving self-identity in action.

A lecture, or digitized lecture to a camera, could be considered a story, and the delivery of the lecture - the telling of a story. For many academics, each time the story is told, their constructed identity shifts ever so slightly, revealing the dynamic nature of the academic or lecturing identity. References [18] and [19] explore the work of representation, and the concept that all of us have multiple identities, to which we are temporarily attached. To that end, we are always a work *in production,* as we move around and take on new tasks, never arriving at a final and concrete constructed identity.

Research on the ways in which academics seek to reconcile their position and co-construct identity within the more corporatized Higher Education sector is growing [10]. Within this environment, [5] sees a clash in academic values, a divide between the perceived sense of oneself as an academic, and the organizationally prescribed version of what an academic might now be. Reference [37] similarly refers to the schism between an academic's perceived identity and the actual experience of how the academic role and daily academic duties are constructed. It is within these spaces this research seeks to dwell to explore and illuminate how academics craft their personal identity as a university lecturer, what that identity might look like, and further, how one comes into being an academic in the dynamic [11] and the increasingly technology driven environment of higher education. Through looking at, inside and around the act of lecturing, this research aims to observe the marks of difference and belonging within the processes of lecturing and how they inform and develop an academic's identity.

II. PERFORMED ACADEMIC IDENTITY

For academics, standing behind a lectern or in front of the camera in the role of a lecturing academic, positions them as 'the expert.' The expert performance of academics or the performance of academic experts - is increasingly being stretched and challenged as academic expertise is required to expand into the domain of digital technologies and other modes of engagement and delivery that are increasingly a part of contemporary higher education settings, for example MOOCS, engaging with students via social media, multi site synchronous and concurrent asynchronous delivery, and intensive short courses. In the current environment of open educational resources, incessant change is often disconcerting, and academics are being required to evolve in order to survive. In this context, "academic professionals are grappling with a fluid identity during continual change within the tertiary sector" [3, p. 718] that ensures academic identity "remains a dynamic and slippery construct" [3, p. 719].

This research, using case study and expert facilitated participatory action research (EFPAR) [1] shines a light on the act of lecturing to critically explore how the experiences of anxiety, fear and stage fright suffered by many academics in delivering lectures, both face-to-face and to camera, can be

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reframed and used to strengthen individuals' academic identity and expertise. For the purpose of this exercise, film coaching interventions have been designed to improve the performative aspects of academic teaching. Articulated through the narrative lens of the actor/academic, these strategies seek to augment the levels of new skill learning and reduce anxiety in the lecture deliver/performance process, and thereby, strengthen the participants' academic identity. To achieve this aim, a multi-step expert facilitated participatory action research project is being employed to explore how academics think and feel in and around the act of lecturing. This will be followed by a program of focused training, in performance for camera. The results of this work will be evaluated and recommendations arrived at.

III. THE RESEARCH SITE/CASE

The site is a research-intensive university, in regional Australia, and our research explores the impacts on academic identity of offering Film Presence coaching to experienced academics delivering a cross-faculty masters level program (MA), in a Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences (HASS) discipline. This location and offering of Film Presence coaching, is part of a larger research project, to be performed at two sites, that seeks to understand the anxieties and stresses experienced by university staff in contemporary teaching situations, and the ways in which performance techniques can improve their capacities to manage these stresses. This particular case study details a unique exercise that occurred in one site, as elaborated in the following discussion.

Expert facilitated participatory action research (EFPAR) [1] was incorporated for this study because the expertise of the researcher is central to the development of the research. The researcher, as a performance expert, presents, facilitates, and mediates the academics' unfolding relationship to particular key performance skills and explores how they inform their sense of academic identity.

IV. PARTICIPANTS

Five academics were invited to take part in an intensive EFPAR project designed to illuminate any experiences of academic stage fright during the new challenge of delivering lectures or lecture-like snippets to camera (in the absence of a live student audience). The academics varied in age from 42 to 62 years of age and had worked in academia for periods of seven to 35 years. They were (all names used are pseudonyms):

- **Alice,** aged 57-64, Senior Administrative Manager, does not hold a PhD, born and raised in Australia. She has 20 years experience in universities in Australia and Hong Kong researching transformational learning and technology links to teaching. First experience with working to camera was to prepare a sample piece for this workshop program. She has performed in amateur theatre some years before and reports "feeling nervous" when presenting to the camera and "relieved afterward".
- **Rune**, aged 41-48, Senior Lecturer, is Danish, gained his

PhD in Europe, has previously taught in a European university, and has been living in Australia for five years, working in universities for seven years, and in NGOs in the aid field for 20 years. He has delivered lectures or key concept pieces, to camera, more than five times previously, and is not one hundred percent happy with his delivery style. He has previously completed *Lecturing as Performance* coaching. Rune reports "feeling a bit nervous", but noting "the weird and comical aspects of being in front of a camera".

- **Pete**, aged 57-64, Senior Lecturer, born and raised in Australia, a former agronomist, gained his PhD in Australia at a mature age, passionate university teacher, committed to delivering excellence for his students. He has 12 years university teaching experience in Australia, plus years of tertiary teaching in Papua New Guinea. He is a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy, has worked to camera between five and 10 times before. He reports "feeling a little apprehensive delivering to camera", "especially during television interviews" but not so much "at a 7 a.m. recording for my students at home".
- **Malalai**, aged 57-64, Associate Professor, is Australian, gained her PhD in Central Asia, and for 35 years has taught/researched in universities in India, America, Germany, New Zealand and Australia, researches gender and agriculture particularly in the Asian region. She has appeared in three short documentaries and is very experienced with performance techniques. She reports "feeling anxious about her accent and embarrassed about forgetting lines" when delivering to camera.
- **Sofan,** aged 49-56, Senior Lecturer, an Australian of Indian heritage, gained her PhD in Australia, has taught/researched in Australian universities for 13 years, working in private research organizations prior to that, a multi-award winning senior lecturer - having won both a Vice Chancellor's Citation for Teaching and Learning Excellence and a Teaching Innovation Award - she has previously delivered to camera three lectures or concept videos for students. She reports "feeling quite stressed", "needing notes" (as a security, that may not be used) but "panicked about finding the right words" when speaking to camera.

V. ACTION RESEARCH, PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH, AND EXPERT FACILITATED PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

The research approach was designed to explore fear in and around the act of lecturing; to find what exists, produce new knowledge and improve academic practice. As such, it is akin to academic anthropology in that it loops practice-led research with research-led practice [31].

Action research in its most basic form is designed to improve one's own practice by gathering information about one's self, with the goal of working more professionally [35], [23]. Facilitated, participatory action research is the interaction and reciprocity designed to help teachers develop knowledge through praxis Ridel, as quoted in [29]. A facilitator can increase participants' awareness, the ease of making links,

choices, the sharing of insights gleaned from working with others, all whilst facilitating discussion. Reference [1] discusses the importance of the facilitator's role in supporting participants and draws on the work of [15, p. 68] to detail how expert facilitators assist with "a willingness to reflect on own and other's values and to acknowledge difference". Reference [15, p. 13] asserts the vital role of the facilitator is "to challenge what is known and accepted".

EFPAR is more finely nuanced again. Reference [16] examines how the EFPAR approach makes deliberate and explicit work processes, learning activities and learning processes, and that this approach is iteratively developed over time. Reference [4] expands on the value of carefully designed sharing activities to promote professional learning and development within an EFPAR environment. Reference [1] investigates how the facilitator records observation, capturing complementary data to deepen the context for analysis, as well as setting the tone for increasingly gentle self (and other) reflection, through the use of comparative dialoguing, and questioning, to expand the participants' understanding of their own new learning. Through the interpretive paradigm, this creation of new knowledge draws heavily on lived experiences [24, p. 188]. Reference [21, p. 523] asserts EFPAR provides an opportunity for shared professional development "it …became clear that we were on a journey in which we were sharing problems and insights and engaging in collaborative enquiry to improve practice".

In EFPAR, it is the facilitator's role to create and sustain an environment of trust, in which participants can be vulnerable and share fledgling professional reflections and explorations through wrestling with 'problematic knowledge', on the path to deeper understanding. The adaptive and dynamic expert facilitator role also aids shifts in the defining of opinions, and in the participants' views to what is and is not possible [1]. The negotiation of roles within the EFPAR construct is a process because most people take time to know, and trust, and for many, this is not an immediate occurrence. In such an evolving and negotiated environment, the facilitator also recognizes the delicate balance between inspiring participants to explore and insisting that they must try something. The expert facilitator also supports the participants in learning a new language of observation and technique, to allow discussion and reflection, in this case on the participants' performance of their lectures.

The work processes, learning activities and learning processes implemented in this research were iteratively developed over time and drew on the work of others. Insights into practice come from a range of sources including [20], [34], who champion the value of on-site coaching, as informed by [36] observation that "transformative professional development … using external expertise… tools for reflection, planning and experimentation processes (can) … encourage, extend and structure professional dialogue" (as cited in [28]. The work of reference [2] also discusses the navigation of the "complex relationships… in academic collaborative action research" by recommending a practical/mutual/collaborative model for "reciprocal and recursive process of collaboration" [2].

VI. THE MICRO CASE

In this paper, we would like to tell you the story of what happened over a three-day period. This account explores the particularity of lecturing to a camera without a live audience. The purpose of the larger project, in which this micro-case nests, is to explore if academics experienced stage fright when delivering a lecture, or digitized lecture-like material to a camera. Specifically, we sought to assess if tailored film coaching could ameliorate fear and discomfort, and positively affect academic identity and self-concept. Film coaching interventions, designed to improve the performative aspects of academic work, are articulated through the narrative lens of an actor/academic [7].

In a research-intensive university located in regional Australia, four, of the cohort of five experienced academics are in attendance for film presence coaching, as part of the EFPAR research study exploring academic stage fright and academic identity. This research is part of a larger study for which ethics approval has been granted.

A. The Process

Days one and two of this site's film presence coaching intervention consisted of preparatory exercises to usher the academics, all experts in their fields, into the domains of embodiment and performance. As [9] discriminates: "There are three stages in understanding an exercise – firstly grasping the exercise at the level of language, second translating it into a physical movement, and third being sensitive to the emotional effect this has upon you". Thus, in order to embrace an embodied style of learning film performance techniques, participants need to be oriented within their body, "bodily activity has the potential to strengthen memories and seed learning, these activities must be designed such that they engineer the desired instances of understanding" [27, p. 448], and learn the language that would allow us to talk about what they felt and saw, and aspired to. To ground the work in their bodies, [30] they needed to: breathe in a way that supports performance; to use their bodies easefully and engender audience trust; to look at the camera, gently, not adopt a rigid steely glare, or glance around working the room, as one might do in a live lecture setting; to understand the frame within which they work (the limited view of the camera) and to effectively gesture within that frame, the cruciality of immediately establishing rapport, rather than using the first few minutes of a digitized lecture as an act of 'performative throat clearing'.

We also guided them through writing for on-camera delivery, condensing lectures, learning what to wear, how to maintain viewer interest, getting used to watching oneself on camera and reviewing the footage of oneself and others, working with a relaxed body and understanding the conventions of storytelling. Each day, the participants were expected to arrive with the prescribed preparatory material for filming, be immediately ready to deliver to camera, and to complete the expected 'homework' prior to the next day.

On day three, of three consecutive days of four-hour film coaching workshops, we were into our 9th hour of film presence coaching, and the cohorts appeared weary. It is important to share here that this coaching was taking place in late November and early December of 2016, at the very tail of a long, taxing academic year. The academics were tired before the workshops even began.

We were preparing to capture final footage, to check for evidence of newly acquired skills. Without trying to pre-empt the research, we wondered would the footage show good shifts in confidence and ease, or not. There was a possibility that if good shifts had occurred, and if the academics were happy with their footage, they might like to use some of it for course introductory purposes, or as a springboard to later filmed pieces. This, however, was optional, there was no implied or applied pressure for a specific outcome. Given the tiredness of the academics, the facilitation team judged it was time to allow the participants a break from the constancy of concurrently learning and creating in front of a camera.

Much of the learning to date had been embodied learning [38], [17]. Anchoring film presence techniques in the body, so participants could later *feel* when they were delivering optimally [32] and *feel* when things were going wrong [33], [8]. Given that many academics like to acquire knowledge more cognitively and follow self-directed learning, we drew their attention to a series of photographs of book covers that we had displayed on a wall. All the titles were performance technique or performance theory related, and now they were sufficiently 'performance-literate' would facilitate ongoing refinement of techniques that had been covered, while allowing independent extension work on some concepts. What followed was a brief synopsis of each title, so participants could best choose their next reading material.

The titles included four books specifically on stage fright: from the fields of music to performance, one offering daily exercises, and one approaching stage fright from a more spiritual slant. Two titles related to reflective and reflexive teaching [32], [33], two books dealt with breathing and voice techniques, one book derived from shame research about self acceptance, one challenging a causal relationship between talent and peak performance, one exploring introversion and extroversion, and two books dealing (quite differently) with achieving effective presence.

A discussion ensued about one title, *"Presence"* by Amy Cuddy, (Fig. 1) [13], a Harvard researcher who researches body language, in particular 'power poses' and their use to harness confidence and portray effective presence, particularly when under gaze. Portraying confidence, *when under gaze*, was especially interesting to this group. During filming of a digitized lecture or lecture-like snippet, one is under gaze, albeit, initially the gaze of the camera, to later be replaced by the gaze of student viewers. Reference [13] speaks of ancient triggers when feeling all eyes upon us, from being hunted and how confronting that can feel; being looked at, as it were, as the next meal.
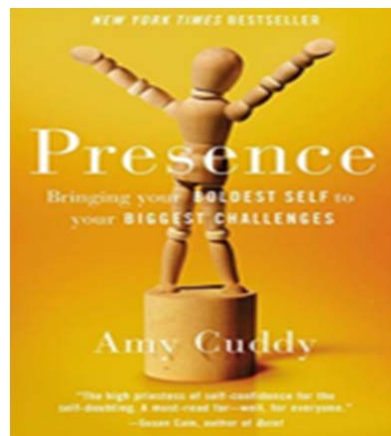

Fig. 1 Cover of Amy Cuddy's book *Presence* [13]

One of the facilitators also shared some relevant research which says the physicality we experience, the so called stressful symptoms - pounding heart, flushed skin and sweaty palms - are not symptoms at all, but actually cause the fear. In this respect, Lange and James [22], [26] illustrate that feelings are physical, and that the felt symptoms, precede the feelings [14, p. 5]. So, the stage fright feelings are an effective response to physiological changes. He argues anxiety is a cognitive interpretation of the flight or fight response, and that we are able to choose how we react. Further, Wood Brooks [6, p. 1], another Harvard researcher, concludes that reappraising anxiety such as is faced when speaking in public, is the answer.

The facilitator shared that Wood Brooks' study identifies trying to calm down in the midst of anxiety was almost unachievable. But embracing the excitement, changing self-talk to saying out loud "I am excited" actually increased observable and reported excitement (which can feel exactly the same as anxiety) and allowed participants to adopt an opportunity mind-set, rather than a threat mind-set. This process allowed participants to achieve arousal congruency. They felt the physical stimulation and sensations, and re-oriented their self-talk and mindset, to now experience them as excitement.

B. The Site-Specific Experimental Exercise

After the segue exercise that involved discussing a montage of book covers, conversation lingered over Cuddy's power pose, as it applies to improved presence, and Wood Brooks' re-framing of fear to excitement. The academics wondered aloud what it might be like to combine both those approaches. **Alice** asked: *"can we try that?"* We agreed to try it, test it, to see if it might work. As a group, we quickly co-created an exercise: to use a sample 30 seconds of the final pre-prepared piece (the one we were just about to capture on film), film that, then, *off camera*, stand in Cuddy's victory power pose (Fig. 2) [13].

Fig. 2 Graphical representation of the Victory power pose all participants used

The pose featured legs slightly apart, nice tall posture and arms raised above the head in a wide V shape – like one might expect of a football player who has just scored the game winning goal, while saying Wood Brooks' *"I'm excited, I'm, excited, I'm excited"*. Then re-film the same sample piece, and review the footage to see if there were any discernible shifts in performance quality in felt and/or displayed confidence.

VII. FINDINGS

EFPAR fosters participant development through focused facilitator directions; *not* through more detailed explanations or demonstrations, but through micro interventions, asking focused questions, and the use of specific in-the-moment instructions. Within the EFPAR model, discussions about actual lecturing experiences - challenges, achievements and disappointments - can be helpful and supportive. An expert facilitator could also incorporate demonstrations in-action [33]-[35] of a teaching event, which facilitates skill acquisition from the perspective of the expert facilitator and through reflection upon and discussion within a group workshop situation.

This can allow research participants to view their performance practices from another perspective. It can give them more ways of understanding what is happening, and it can allow participants to broaden their insight and devise links to use in a performance situation, whether it be to a live audience or a camera. Key to this model is that the expert facilitator, just like the director in the theatre or on a film set, needs to manage the action. Using the trust built, skill acquisition, flexibility and expert judgment inherent within EFPAR was crucial to creating an environment in which going off-task and experimenting, as suggested by participants, was embraced and indeed possible.

It is worth noting that all participants were skeptical, before and while doing this. It did not seem likely that this simple exercise could possibly work… and yet to our surprise and delight, it did! There was lots of hearty laughter, **Pete**, whilst preparing off camera in the power pose said: *"I'm not excited, I'm not excited, I'm not excited"*, but it still worked!

The difference in observable film presence effectiveness was like flicking a switch: night to day. There were stunning improvements in delivery. Participants immediately shared that they felt more "enlivened", "awake", "energetic", "on" and "effortless" during the second thirty-second delivery. What was even more interesting, to us, watching on, in the live room, although there were clear shifts in *felt* confidence,

there did not seem to be much shift in *observable* presence – *but, on the monitor* – playing back what the camera had captured, the difference was quite remarkable. As a side note, one of the disciplines of teaching film presence is to review and watch *the footage,* not the live performance, as the final audience will only see the digitized footage not the live performance, and they often look quite different.

VIII. OBSERVABLE PERFORMANCE SHIFTS

After the 30 second off camera experiment, participants were visibly more present, markedly stronger vocally, delivered with higher energy, captured our attention immediately (rather than warming into rapport), and looked and stood more confidently. **Sofan** shared that she *felt* physically more present, but *felt* intellectually less able – because she "muddled" her words. From the perspective of the observers (Pete, Alice, Malalai and the facilitation team), the words were apt and well functioning.

IX. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

All the academics in our sample have been highly mobile and migratory in their careers, having gained qualifications, worked, taught and researched in a variety of countries. All members of the sample of academics in this study expressed some concern about the challenge of this new aspect to their performed academic identity, being an academic on-camera. For the modern academic, film presence is becoming an increasingly expected and highly desirable skill that could enhance mobility options. Globally, there is a move to digitized, online and blended learning offerings, as digitized lecture or lecture-like material allows students flexibility in terms of accessing learning opportunities from different times and locations around the world. While longer, more intense film presence coaching, of which this experiment was a part, may not be available to all academics and universities, this short self-coaching technique may be worth trying.

For these academics, this micro experiment was successful. It surprised them. This technique is something any academic could easily adopt as a form of self-coaching: using a smart phone on a tripod to capture and review their footage. As the modern university increasingly desires presenting material to students in digitized form, the acquisition of the fast becoming core competency of film presence, to enable delivering a lecture to a camera, is highly desirable, and with some practice, as demonstrated by our cohorts, enhanced academic self concept and identity. For future studies we look forward to researching the same approach in European, American, South American and Asian universities to see if we find similar professional migratory and mobility patterns, and resulting congruency.

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