

Academic citizenship for a digimodern academy

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Abstract

In this essay, we are resituating the practices of academic citizenship within a digimodern academy. We propose that in a world of fragmented narratives surrounding higher education in America, academics should act as stewards of what ever positive higher education narratives they wish to promote and to align their academic citizenship practices accordingly. We argue that rather than having narratives imposed upon academics externally, there is power in creating and controlling our own narratives. This essay situates the academy in a digimodem context, and it explores the connection between power and narratives about higher education. This essay then examines academic citizenship in light of creating and maintaining higher education narratives and finally illustrates how it may look in practice.

Keywords: academic citizenship; digmodernism; faculty ethics; public scholarship; narrative

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With recent institutional shifts over the last few years, United States higher education institutions have come to accept that communication technology is inextricably connected to the core functions of the university, for good or ill. Though American higher education has a history with incorporating communication technology (e.g., the existence of online higher education institutions and programs), the sudden pivot in 2020 to an online presence for almost all institutions served as a punctuated equilibrium event (Purcell & Lumbreras, 2021)—transforming our expectations of how higher education functions and its role in broader society.

With that change, we argue that American higher education has more fully evolved from postmodernity (Bloland, 2005) into *digimodernism* (Kirby, 2009). We use the term ‘evolve’ because digimodernism retains many of the tenets of

postmodernism, but it amplifies the roles that technology and media have in that experience. More specifically, digimodernism emphasizes how communication technology determines which narratives and discourses gain the power to shape our epistemology of the world. Almost two decades ago, Bloland (2005) and others argued that higher education was still grappling with its modern foundational core in light of postmodern changes. We extrapolate that argument even further to the idea that higher education institutions have become a chimera in form and function; but rather than a majestic beast, it can seem like institutions have become a poor amalgamation of parts, shambling along. We can see this outcome as colleges and universities incorporate more neoliberal strategies and practices from the business sector, while still trying to maintain communitarian structures. Institutions try to meet expectations of being a public good, while looking more like privatized economic engines. As academics within these places, we can experience these tensions in light of our work.

Now, the struggle between modern and postmodern includes digimodern aspects of higher education, and it has resulted in a hyper-fragmented institution that erodes further ‘any sense of unified purpose’ (Bloland, 2005, p.134). This fragmentation and lack of unified purpose can also undermine existing public trust in higher education (Pasquerella, 2017), as people craft different narratives of higher education, and not all of them are positive or even reflect what actually occurs.

Within this context, we then ask ourselves: What is the faculty role in this digimodern space? What part can faculty play amongst these fragmented narratives of higher education in the US?

This essay explores what academic citizenship in higher education may entail in a digimodern era and how it can manifest in practice. We propose that for a digimodern world, faculty should take an active role in the sustaining, creating, and promoting of narratives surrounding higher education. They can do this by being stewards of the narrative/s they want to promote, which guides their academic citizenship practices accordingly. Reunification of narratives is not the goal (we could even argue that our modern understanding of American higher education was never really unified). Rather, academic citizenship is about making a conscious choice to strengthen and support those narratives we believe to be important.

We organize this essay in the following manner. First, we situate the academy in a digimodern context. Second, we discuss the connection between power and narratives about the history, purpose, and significance of higher education. Third, we examine academic citizenship in light of creating and maintaining higher education narratives, and finally, we discuss how it may look in practice.

Digimodernism and the academy

Digimodernism is broadly characterized by the interactive relationship people have with communication technology (Kirby, 2009). In this age, we are simultaneously creators and consumers of information. Power and legitimacy are no longer guaranteed by tradition and institutionalism. Instead, power and legitimacy can now be found in spheres of influence and social media reach. The digimodern age gives rise to the power of the local subjective narrative (compared to the idea of an objective “grand narrative”). Even more so, those modes of communication are dictated by media companies and algorithms that play a role in what narratives get shared more than others. In the case of higher education, the student with a large audience of Tiktok followers may have more power to influence beliefs about higher education than a well-cited faculty member. These narratives can carry more weight in shaping perceptions of higher education, its practices and policies than any actual information or empirical evidence. For example, in 2018, University of Utah art student Nemo Miller created an installation titled *Safe space for stressed out students otherwise known as the cry closet* as part of their coursework. It featured a standalone closet lined with stuffed animals (Bird, 2018). The art piece went viral on social media, sparking memes and making headlines. However, rather than understanding it as student art, one of the prevailing narratives was that the closet was a university-sponsored “safe space” program and viewed as another way higher education infantilized students. The narrative gained enough traction that Fox News titled a segment ‘Higher education at work: “Cry closets” for snowflakes’ lambasting higher education and calling into question its value (Fox News, 2018).

The current speed and ease with which people can create narratives and share stories is more impressive than when Boland wrote of communication technology and postmodernism in 2005. Narratives are how people interpret, understand, and share experiences with one another (Macgilchrist, 2021). They contain power because they shape our expectations of the world. In digimodernism—like postmodernism—these stories are subjective, fractured, and contradictory (Foucault, 1972; Lyotard, 1994). These stories are localized and compete to be more “true” by being the most compelling and most shared, rather than the most accurate. The proliferation of social media with other communication technology lets people spread these narratives and influence others in the time it takes for a tweet or TikTok to upload and go viral. The use of artificial intelligence, algorithms, and bots to promote some stories over others also adds a layer of complexity to this issue.

The connection between narratives, power and the mythos of higher education in this digimodern world

The stories and narratives that exist about higher education have their own kind of power. Narratives shape the ways that people come to understand the world: our epistemologies (Foucault, 1972). In its early history, we can see how American higher education was tied to theological training and the rites of passage for the sons of the wealthy elite. It later shifted to being a means for those to achieve the American Dream (Mettler, 2014), a meritocracy where individuals can have social mobility and change their futures. The general public began to see higher education as a public good, valuable and worthy of investment, and public policy reflected those beliefs. Even now, despite some waning support, many people still believe that higher education is an important investment and a public good (Fishman et al., 2021). We are not here to determine if the belief in higher education is warranted, we want to highlight that these beliefs exist.

Why do these beliefs matter? They matter because, ultimately, higher education as an institution and an idea relies on what people believe higher education to be, even if it does not reflect what it actually is. Though colleges and universities function like many other organizations, with their day-to-day practices and mundane work, they also feed into something larger: the *mythos of Higher Education*. We borrow Bouchard's (2016) definition of a social myths as 'collective representations (beneficial or harmful) that convey values, beliefs, and aspirations' (p. 367), but we use the term 'mythos' to separate our idea from more traditional definitions of the term 'myth.' What each mythos entails may be different for different people, but one element of the mythos that has helped higher education persevere is the idea that it has value to individuals and the public.

Rather than focusing on what mythoi are more "true" than others, we want the reader to think about which collective narrative they would want to support over others. There is power in choosing which narratives to promote, rather than having someone else determine the narratives for us. It is here where we argue academic citizenship can play an important role.

Mythoi of higher education are not all positive. It is important to note that the positive mythoi of higher education are vulnerable to other competing narratives, such as ones that frame higher education as 'reserved for those within the ivory tower, reflecting a willful disconnect from the practical matters of everyday life' (Pasquerella, 2017). Some people are already stewards of these narratives of higher education. These mythoi frame it as an archaic institution, with petty academics and coddled students (e.g, Harrison, 2019), and sources of indoctrination rather than learning. Every indiscretion or unethical behavior

practiced by an academic, especially once it makes it to the public stage, continues to feed these types of mythoi. In a digimodern space, the only narratives that matter are the ones that people give the most credence, and stories shared over social media serve as further “evidence” toward the validity of certain mythoi.

Why does digimodernism matter regarding academic citizenship?

In the modernist era, there was a clearer sense of the role of the university (Bloland, 2005; Gilliam & Kritsonis, 2007). Higher education was understood as a state-funded public good and ‘teachers, students, and administrators were involved in an enterprise in which common beliefs were held about what the institution was doing’ (Bloland, 2005, p. 132). Colleges and universities supplied a middle-class, employment-ready, socialized student to participate in a diversifying democracy. In this era, higher education held a monopoly on knowledge production, making the physical campus a hub for translation, dissemination, and consumption. In a digimodern era, universities no longer hold that monopoly. The narrative of higher education as a public good has changed, and the role of its faculty has shifted toward more individualized narratives of academic citizenship. The digimodern era has eroded the coherency of some narratives and allowed others to take shape, and faculty find themselves in an increasingly fragmented organization with numerous expectations and demands.

Rather than arguing for changing academic citizenship, we want to resituate academic citizenship (Macfarlane, 2005). We want academics to lean into the fragmentation and to practice their academic citizenship in ways that contribute positively to the mythos and symbolism of higher education—*however they envision them to be*. In addition to contributing, we include the idea of *promoting* those narratives of higher education. Public scholarship can play a pivotal role, as academics should not be passive bystanders by letting narratives about them be created without them.

In a digimodern era, the role of academic citizenship shifts to mean that in the absence of one coherent narrative, faculty can be creators and stewards of the higher education narratives they want to support, rather than only be subjected to the narratives of others. As academics, we could take to our communication technology and craft narratives through our social media and public engagement to varying degrees of success. Instead, we propose a simpler, but perhaps more challenging, idea: that we embody our beliefs of higher education through our practice. For example, if faculty make equity a part of the higher education narrative and see their academic citizenship as a responsibility to uphold that narrative in

their practice, then they focus their citizenship practice toward building and promoting an equitable system. Thus, the goal of academic citizenship becomes less about the centrality of one narrative imposed externally and is replaced by the narratives we choose to embody and enact.

What would academic citizenship look like?

Macfarlane divides the elements of academic citizenship into three components: political literacy, community involvement, and social and moral responsibility (2005). We use Macfarlane's conceptualization of academic citizenship because it can capture a broader spectrum of faculty appointments at different institutions. Unlike other more traditional models of teaching, scholarship, and service which tend to refer specifically to tenure-track faculty at research institutions (Labaree, 2004), this model allows for us to take into consideration the changing faculty demographics and include institutions such as community college or normal universities.

First, regarding political literacy, Macfarlane (2005) defines it as 'participating in decision-making processes at all levels within the institution and respecting due process' (p. 300). For Macfarlane, political literacy is localized to collegial governance and focuses on participating in the organization's governing structures to shape the institution from within. If a faculty member believes that the value of higher education and academic freedom are connected, then they would seek to align their participation in those areas. Academic governance is an avenue where faculty can contribute their voice to the institutional narratives, and perhaps align how their institution functions with the narrative they support.

Second, Macfarlane (2005) discusses community involvement as a form of academic and community engagement. Faculty can define the communities they serve in organizational and communal terms. Though notions of community involvement will sometimes overlap, academics need to consider who they serve in the various roles they inhabit. For example, when designing a syllabus, academics may decolonize the reading list to reflect a broader community that has shaped knowledge in a given area or one that is connected to the local community. Others may take on more overt community involvement in the name of service, public scholarship, or advocacy. Community involvement can encompass the broader political participation not captured in the first form of academic citizenship. In any case, such actions are public signals of the academic's collegial and communal commitments.

Finally, social and moral responsibility relates to collegiality among colleagues and students (Macfarlane, 2005). In this area, academics choose what values they want to promote and share through their interactions with others, which includes both virtual and in-person spaces. The values that individual academics exhibit can resonate within the university, scholarly community, and the public. By continuing to act in accordance with their values, faculty not only build community but also model academic citizenship for others, which serves as a form of socialization and further promotes the narratives that they wish to be more dominant at their institution and in their field. As we think about academic citizenship in a digimodern academy, we see it as an individual alignment between narratives and practices across all three areas outlined. It is the collection of these individual narratives that shapes the broader set of discourses about higher education.

Our proposal for academic citizenship for a digimodern academy presents an interesting conundrum. Academics cannot opt-out of supporting a higher education narrative. The decisions we make in our work and our actions contribute in some way to some narrative, whether we choose it or not. However, we can try to align our citizenship practices to the narratives of higher education we want to support in a bid for authenticity.

Conclusion

Digimodern academic citizenship is a discursive loop of narratives and discourses the individual chooses to enact and embody, which produces and is product of the communities they inhabit. As Tierney (2003) notes, '[t]he life of the academic is inevitably rooted in communal obligations' (p.17), and these communal obligations extend beyond the walls of the academy into the non-academic sectors of society. One of the ways that we can contribute to the positive narratives of higher education is through engaging with public scholarship. Especially in an era where many marginalized and disenfranchised communities feel threatened, a digimodern academic can serve as a steward of a higher education narrative that promotes equitable, diverse democracy through social justice (Kezar & Drivalas, 2019) and contributes to the public good.

In a digimodern academy, we must become accustomed to the uncomfortable space where we recognize people are creating narratives of higher education and we are a part of those narratives. We may not be the featured hero or villain in those stories, but as we interact with people in our professional capacity, we either affirm or negate their narratives of higher education. But, we are not without agency—we also have a choice. Rather than having narratives externally

imposed upon us and finding ways to respond and react, academics can recognize that we also can control the narrative. Higher education has become a crucible for multiple social and political issues in times of uncertainty. While the conversation regarding academic freedom and faculty rights must continue, we must also consider our responsibilities. In uncertain times, the narratives we choose can guide our choices and actions as academic citizens by clarifying our responsibilities to multiple communities. Through our practices of academic citizenship, we should work to promote a positive narrative of higher education. Not only because it maintains the connection between higher education and the public, but perhaps in our practice, we bring the reality of higher education closer to a positive mythos of the institution.

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