An investigation into the dialectic of Academic Teaching Identity: Some preliminary findings (0144)

<u>Agi Ryder</u>, Gillian Lazar, Paul Gibbs, Carole Davis
Middlesex University, UK

Background and context

Within UK Higher Education the professionalization of university teaching has become increasingly significant with regards to its perceived role in improving student engagement (Nyamapfene, 2014) as well as aligning with recent government proposals regarding the Teaching Excellence Framework. Yet developing teaching excellence in higher education goes beyond acquiring the technical capacities needed to perform an occupation effectively. It extends to the formation of lecturers' identities, an area which is somewhat contested in current thinking. Trede, Mackin and Bridges (2011), for example, argue that academic identify develops when there is an alignment with a professional attitudes, while Nevgi and Löfström (2015) found that a teacher identity was a function of a dynamic interaction between reflection on teaching practice and deepening knowledge of theoretical pedagogical constructs. However, there remains little agreement on a framework for understanding the development of this professional teaching identity.

This presentation reports on a project which aims to explore the development of the pedagogic identity of the participants on the Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education (PG Cert HE). PG Cert HEs represent a significant investment of time for new academics (Smith, 2010). Those on the programme are simultaneously students and teachers, which offers a unique insight into the formation and co-production of academic identity. They all teach on a variety of courses representing a wide range of disciplines. The research seeks to explore how these course participants construct and transform their professional academic identity over time.

Methodology

This study takes a phenomenological approach in order to explore the co-construction of academic identity and takes a temporal auto-biographical approach. Data was collected using various methods to ensure the validity and reliability of the findings. First, data was collected using a reflective narrative that participants wrote as they completed the first module of the course. This snapshot of their early personal reflections on their role, their teaching philosophy and examples from their practice provides a valuable and in-depth insight into how they perceive their own development as academics early on in their journey. Second, data was captured with the help of a reflective learning blogs that participants maintained through the academic year. This ongoing record captured their reflections on different aspects of their academic life, critical incidents and lessons learnt. Finally, individual academics were interviewed at the end of the programme to be able to gain a more profound understanding of their perceptions. The study draws on the experience of 17 participants undertaking the programme. Ethical approval was granted by xxx University in October 2015. Participants' informed consent was sought at the beginning of the study, and they were given access to information about the project as well as the opportunity to ask further questions. The collected data was analysed using open

coding to identify emerging themes and categories (Charmaz, 2014). These emerging codes and categories were then used to build a conceptual framework.

Preliminary findings

This presentation reports on the preliminary findings of the study and the initial themes emerging from the analysis of collected data. The findings indicate that the development of an academic identity is more nuanced that simply developing a professional identity that is clearly defined, bounded which implies a linear process of being socialised into a professional community. Participants conceptualise identity formation as a fluid process of construction, which is variable and dependent on context. Identity construction happens in a liminal space and is an ongoing process of building on existing professional identities, fusing additional elements while shifting and moving back and forth in a liminal space. The development of new temporal identities does not happen in isolation, rather the role of previous well-established professional identities is significant (e.g. Nurses, researchers ... etc.). This can be both empowering and challenging at the same time. Critical incidents have a transformational role in shaping academic identity. Reflection and practical problem solving play an important role when co-constructing and reinforcing aspects of one's academic identity.

The proposed theoretical framework conceptualises academic identity formation as a fluid process where academics are working towards some notion of self-actualisation and an ideal self, which is dependent on various factors, such as the individual, the context, previously established professional and personal identities.

Implications of the study

The proposed theoretical framework has the potential to further our understanding of on the various strands of that influence the development of academic identity and offer additional elements to consider in the current discourse around the role of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). The TEF aims to foster a culture where teaching is highly valued in universities as it is central to enhancing students' learning. Understanding how academics develop an identity which incorporates teaching excellence as a core strand enables us to consider ways of improving the student experience. The findings also raise some questions about the best way of supporting the development of academic identities that takes into consideration the elements of the framework and the institutional and personal context and aspirations of early career academics. Questions around the perceived status of teaching vs other activities (e.g. Research, professional practice) in academia were raised and have implications for career development. While there is no 'one size fits all' magic formula when it comes to supporting this process, the roles and responsibilities of institutions and academic developers working with academics could be explored further. Future research could explore the way students perceive and contribute to the co-construction of academic identity.

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