Theories in Progress Series: Perpetual Identity Constructing

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Perpetual Identity Constructing

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Abstract

For academics who work within higher education, the difficulties
in finding the space and time to learn, to reflect and to self-
evaluate have increased due to multiple expectations and
demands of an increasingly competitive business environment.
This substantive theory of 'Perpetual Identity Constructing'
proposes that when academics are presented with an opportunity
to enhance their development, they experience a 3-stage process
that facilitates their constructing a preferred sense of their
academic identity. This theory of managing a predisposed
identity, deconstructing and then reconstructing a preferred
academic identity demonstrates the critical importance of
institutional support for providing academics with needed space
and time to realise their full potential.

Key words: Academic identity, possibility portals, learning
spaces.

Introduction

In contemporary society, universities exist within a context
of supercomplexity (Barnett, 2000a). Supercomplexity refers to
the requirement that the university must respond to an over-
abundance of information in a world that is now characterised by:

> [c]ontestability, changeability, uncertainty and
> predictability, these four concepts are surrounded by
> others such as change, turbulence, risk and chaos.
> Together, this set of concepts marks out the conceptual
> geography of our supercomplexity as an age of fragility...
> It is an age in which nothing can be taken for granted. In
> short all bets are off. It is an age of conceptual and

> thereby, emotional insecurity (Barnett, 2000a, pp. 414-416)

A consequence of this supercomplexity is uncertainty within higher education; 'the individual increasingly stands alone, looking for security in the face of uncertainty' (Annandale, 1998, p.19). The changing nature of higher education is a global phenomenon that has impacted the vast majority of academics with a 'weariness and resistance to what is perceived to be externally imposed shifts in the higher education environment' (D'Andrea & Gosling 2005, p.15). Lecturers are faced with increased class sizes, greater student diversity (McNay, 2005), more short term contracts and an ever-increasing research agenda (Boud, 1999). Consequently, academics have experienced so much difficulty in adapting to this rapid change that they no longer are sure of what is expected of them (Harris, 2005; Biggs, 2003; Trowler, 2001; Henkel, 2000). Biggs (2003) suggests that those now working in higher level institutions originate from one of two groups: the older, more mature academics who express that they no longer recognise the environment in which they work and the younger academics on short term contracts who lack employment security and therefore would not consider attempting anything that may be out of kilter with the organisation's overall strategy. The difficulty in adapting to change is further compounded by the increased emphasis on accountability and a perceived lack of institutional support in pursuing needed change. The imposition of increased demands has led to a sense of powerlessness, particularly in terms of teaching and learning (Rowland, 2000).

The established research agenda within many higher level institutions has left many academics frustrated in regard to their positions and their roles. This is further heightened by organisational structures that fail to foster teaching and learning. This sentiment of frustration has been expressed by Scott (2002, p. 27):

> In our knowledge intensive society, we are both teachers and researchers. The present separation between teaching and research damages both. You cannot communicate knowledge without adding to it and you cannot add to knowledge without communicating it. Every act of exposition, every dialogue with a student, has the potential for creating new insights; and all

research findings must be communicated, the wider the better.

Often, teaching and learning is not high on the academic agenda due to the lack of space and time needed to be proactive in teaching and learning development. If such time and space were available, it might be perceived as better to concentrate one's energy on research. Under such conditions, efforts to construct a preferred academic identity are unlikely to succeed. Attempts to encourage competency development in teaching and learning are lost unless academics perceive some value in teaching and learning for career progression or permanency within the organisation. Without some clear indication of institutional support for their engaging in change and competency development, academics often default to maintaining the status quo. This argument is supported by several studies that show that academics often resist change and undermine it from occurring in many different ways (Trowler, 1998; Hannon & Silver, 2000; Henkel, 2000).

Constructing a preferred academic identity requires not only a personal commitment from each academic but also a reshuffling of institutional priorities; more is involved than simply deciding to change. However, it is increasingly difficult for academics to find the needed space or time to undertake such change as energies deplete under the pressures of intensified operational environments within higher education (Eriksen, 2001; Hassan, 2003). Thus, the ability to create space or time is not easy and the idea of slowing down the pace of work seems unrealistic. Speed is often associated with decisiveness and efficiency and slowing down or 'slow time' is viewed as being lazy or inefficient. For many academics, the fact that there is less and less time to accomplish requisite tasks has become a general constraint in which the future is less predictable, more uncertain, and long term planning rarely achieved due to frantic focusing on the here and now.

Research Design

The goal of this research was to generate to a systematic, explanatory theory of academic identity construction within higher education. Grounded theory was selected because it provides a way of discovering theoretically complete explanations about particular phenomena (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978; 1992; 2001; 2002; 2003a; 2005). Grounded theory is useful

because there are many unanswered questions regarding the construction of academic identity in higher education and there appears to be no existing grounded theories that explain this phenomenon.

Participants were recruited from a cohort of academics from a higher education institution within the Republic of Ireland. A total of 27 in-depth, unstructured interviews were conducted. During the initial phase of data collection, the first 15 interviews were transcribed verbatim. Transcription was conducted as a learning process in doing grounded theory and due to a fear of not capturing all of the data. In the latter phases of theoretical sampling, the interviews were audio-recorded, but not transcribed. Extensive field notes and memos were written after each interview.

Context

Academics, both recently employed and long standing from diverse disciplines at an Irish university, were invited to attend a Graduate Diploma in Teaching and Learning. Such invitations have become a compulsory requirement in some universities. The opportunity to attend served as a possibility portal; a conduit or vehicle that challenged the participants to come together and develop a common understanding of teaching and learning. By sharing personal experiences, which were often similar, they forged a collegiality that otherwise might not have occurred. This possibility portal provided significant learning space and 'slow time' to reflect on academic identity. In so doing, possibility portals may incite a change in thinking and identity for academics.

The Main Concern

The main concern for academics is development time. The inability to find time perpetuates problems associated with identity construction. Indeed, academics express a sense of losing ground and being manipulated to best suit the organisation and the discipline to which they belong. They are unable to decide what becoming an academic and working in the realm of higher education means to them. Consequentially, academics are often steered down a particular road that is not of their choosing. Thus the ability to find a voice, to stand out against current organisational and disciplinary structures is not easy to achieve. Resolving this concern requires a perpetual constructing of

academic identity.

Perpetually Constructing

Perpetually Constructing is a complex and demanding endeavour. In this three-stage basic social process (Glaser, 1978), academics must first manage their predisposed academic identities. They do so through the sub-processes of determining and conforming. Academic identity is then deconstructed through surviving, relinquishing and exposing and reconstructed through engaging and spacing.

The journey is unique for each academic. It is not a straight-forward, linear process executed within a specific time period. Instead, it is a cyclical process that is never quite completed as the need to constantly re-develop and re-learn is ever present. Even when a new identity is constructed, individuals still experience many wrong turns and errors in judgment as they continue to develop and grow professionally. Thus the stages of deconstructing and reconstructing identity are continuously present in the lifetime of the academic.

Managing Predisposed Academic Identity

A possibility portal such as the postgraduate diploma course on teaching and learning in this study becomes a place where academics can confront pre-existing or predisposed academic identities; identities that exist prior to their entering into higher education and encompass all past experiences (childhood, religious beliefs, undergraduate and post graduate instruction). For the majority of academics, consciously defining one's 'self' may be a new experience requiring the surfacing of an identity formed in the subconscious, reinforced by the organisation or discipline. Such possibility portals aid academics in reflecting on their practice, their positions within their disciplines and within the wider structure of their organisations.

Determining

Determining relates to the developmental process of consciously shaping academic identity to core beliefs and choices that have been made in the process of becoming an academic and in defending and understanding those choices. Core beliefs evolve and develop throughout life, with moral and ethical aspects influenced by significant others in their lives; they set the foundation for thoughts, actions, choices and behaviours. These

beliefs become significant in constructing academic identity as professional practice within higher education needs to align with individual core beliefs to mitigate the potential for cognitive dissonance. Each individual's life experiences differ and this has a significant influence on how 'centered' they will feel when confronted by discipline-specific or institutional attempts to construct a generic sense of identity. When core beliefs are so challenged, academics face the difficulty of attempting to conform to both disciplinary or organisational goals as well as their own.

Conforming

Conforming concerns what it means to be an academic within one's discipline. Disciplinary identity creates a sense of belonging and safety and entails a strong personal commitment to 'a way of being'; of being subliminally moulded into an accepted way of thinking. Academics make a personal commitment to a professional discipline as students and gradually become immersed into frameworks of belief that shape their academic identities. However, conforming can be troublesome when an individual's beliefs conflict with those of the profession or culture of the higher education institution to which they are attached. Thus, conforming can be a struggle for academics as they contemplate a new set of core beliefs against a fear of the potential choices that they make.

Higher level institutions are complex social structures in which the nature of academic work is changing rapidly resulting in increased pressure and less security. Tensions exist in trying to conform to a prescribed institutional identity and in trying to combine this institutional identity with disciplinary and individual identities. While academics may change intrinsically as a result of entering into a possibility portal, the lack of support and recognition from colleagues, management or the university outside such portals often makes it hard to sustain the desired change. The perceived need for conforming provides further evidence of the constant conflict that academics may experience as they try and assert themselves against constraining boundaries and their attempts to conform and/or confront such barriers.

Deconstructing Academic Identity

The next stage in perpetual identity construction is that of deconstructing academic identity. It occurs when academics have

entered a possibility portal and begin to deconstruct previous knowledge and understanding of what it means to be an academic. Deconstructing academic identity is difficult, as it undresses or exposes preconceptions which have been strongly held, often without question. When a possibility portal opens up a world of new possibilities, established and carefully constructed academic identities are challenged. Academics then explore potential alternative selves. In doing so, they must relinquish the comfortable understanding of their former academic selves, which can be troublesome and disconcerting. Uncertainty and fear can become apparent as individuals battle to understand what it means to be an academic. Frequently, individuals must negotiate their paths alone without support, encouragement or career progression opportunities within the university's prescribed framework. Doing so involves surviving, relinquishing and exposing.

Surviving

Although academics value their autonomy, surviving as academics may require sacrificing and/or forgoing opportunities. For example, they may be consciously aware of and anticipate negative responses when bringing any significant innovation, particularly in the area of teaching and learning, to colleagues and students. Furthermore, the time required to develop such innovations may negatively impact career progression as time to implement a new teaching philosophy competes with research time. Consequently, the identities that academics seek to create must be sustainable and in synch with what is expected. Thus, needs and desires to survive often entail having dual identities in which they are viewed as having excellence in teaching and in research. However, sooner rather than later, academics begin to recognise that consistent success in both domains may not be possible and that they may have to relinquish expertise in one area.

Relinquishing

Relinquishing requires choosing between teaching or research as high achievement in both areas is not always possible. Academics must also relinquish or surrender a locus of control; for example, the enthusiasm that one acquires as new knowledge and understanding of teaching and learning are gained from exposure within possibility portals can translate into perceived difficulties when one becomes cognisant of the realities

of the everyday world of work and the barriers that may prevent one from turning new knowledge into something productive and sustainable. Therefore, relinquishing can be disillusioning, as academics perceive the need to reconcile their `notions of grandeur' which have been fostered through possibility portals with the harsh realities of practice. If academics wish to relinquish their existing identities and to replace them with something new, then they must accept that new practices are more worthwhile than those in existence. Thus it is reasonable for academics not to change if they are not going to receive recognition.

Some academics associate the process of academic reconstruction with losing a part of their identities. This sense of loss, however, is unfounded, as academics do not lose their identities but rather build on the foundation of a prior existence transforming their academic identities into something better. Relinquishing brings with it a fear of exposing and being subjected to unnecessary ridicule and vulnerability.

Exposing

Changing identities can be equated to exposing one's vulnerabilities; to feeling unprotected and defenceless as uncertainties increase in moving from an existing state of ease to one of susceptibility. The existing state of ease is one in which academics can continue with the same unquestioned identity that they have constructed over time and which may never be disputed. Alternatively, academics can begin a process of self-questioning and self-reflection regarding their existence within the realm of their discipline and their organization. This new knowledge, however, can be troublesome as it is often incongruent with previous knowledge and encourages academics to reconstruct their professional identities. If the work environment is suitably aligned or open to possible change in current practices, then knowledge that is challenging can be surmounted and the intended transformations are more likely to occur.

Reconstructing Academic Identity

Reconstructing brings individuals closer to achieving transformed academic identity, where they are provided or supported in developing a protected and nurturing space in which to reinvent themselves using new knowledge and understanding.

Important to this stage are engaging, and spacing.

Engaging

Academics need opportunities to debate the 'supercomplexity' (Barnett, 2000a) of the higher education environment before they can begin to appreciate the necessity of perpetually reconstructing their roles. Engaging opens up the possibility that change can be positive and not feared. Engagement occurs as a result of possibility portals which provide space and time for such discovery. When academics are socialised into the world of higher education, there is often an explicit understanding that they are proficient in all areas of academic life. More often than not, this proves not to be the case and the process of change can be difficult particularly when it is not in concert with disciplinary and organisational demands. This incongruity can only be determined through exposure and engagement with possibility portals where they begin to see that perpetual construction of their identities is simply part of academic life. Once academics begin to engage in the prospect of potential change and the need to continuously refit identities, reconstructing becomes enabling.

Enabling evokes power, as academics begin to realise the power that they have and how this power can enable them to make their own choices rather than those predetermined by external forces such as their discipline or institution. Thus enabling encourages individuals to develop their full potential. Enabling creates a confidence and the assertiveness needed for change to be successful and sustainable.

Spacing

The ability to develop a sense of self and to live with the complexity of choices made in terms of career progression and in developing important collegial and student relationships generates a need for space and time to explore these processes. Spacing refers to the placing of academics in a safe, physical space, removed from their everyday working life, where learning about the nature and purpose of higher education and what it means to be an academic can occur. Spacing encompasses an actual space, a social space and a safe space all of which are essential to maintain the intellectual health of academics.

Actual space is the physical environment; away from academic's own department or at least an area that is free from

potential interruption. Different spaces often prompt new ways of viewing things and provide greater opportunities for thinking, reflecting and challenging one to think differently. Social space allows and encourages an openness and freedom of expression, where there are opportunities for dialogue and debate to naturally occur in a social and unconstrained way. These social spaces also need to be safe spaces. Safe spaces allow academics to expose any personal and professional uncertainties in a protective and encouraging environment free of subjective criticisms yet encouraging logical, objective and judicious perspectives. In essence, spacing provides the opportunity for academics to reconstruct identities in alignment with discipline and institutional pedagogies thereby allowing them to realise their potential.

Discussion of the Literature

Barnett (2005) has argued that the function of higher level institutions has changed considerably in the last number of years causing a considerable shift in the role of the academic, with it becoming more diverse and uncertain. Consequently, academics have experienced much difficulty in adapting to such rapid change as they are no longer sure of what is expected of them (Harris, 2005; Biggs, 2003; Trowler, 2001; Henkel, 2000). Some educational theorists argue that core beliefs play a significant part in influencing and shaping academic identities (Pajares, 1992, Comb, 1999). However, most studies focus on the area of academic/teacher beliefs and in doing so, do not place sufficient emphasis on the importance of core beliefs as possible reasons for renitence to change, or at least they fail to look at core beliefs as an appropriate starting point to encourage construction of academic identity and attitudes. Indeed, it might also be suggested that most studies view core beliefs as an inert concept that perhaps cannot be altered whereas this grounded theory argues that if one is to consider core beliefs as closely intertwined with academic identity, then conversely it can be argued that individual core beliefs can be altered through an individual's gaining more knowledge and insight into academia and its significance for them as an individual.

The educational literature recognises the change that has occurred and continues to occur at an unprecedented rate within higher education and that academic freedom has been eroded due to an emphasis on accountability and quality control measures

(Barnett, 2005). The literature supports this theory's concept of surviving in recognizing that academics are in a battle to survive with the constant changes that are occurring within the realm of higher education; however, the literature fails to discuss academic identity as a continuous process instead limiting discussion to the initial development of identity rather than how it can be improved or altered. Hey (2001, 1997), Skeggs (1997), and Reay (1997) suggest that time management preoccupies those working within higher education. Indeed, it is difficult to separate the demand and need for time without making the provision for space yet within higher education the importance of space is not valued as can be seen through organisational practices that frequently accord an inordinate amount of time to unnecessary meetings yet limit office space (Savin Baden, 2008).

Contributions from this Study

This grounded theory uncovers a basic social process that explains how academics need to perpetually construct professional identities throughout their academic careers and offers the concept of possibility portals for creating the space and time needed if academics are to become self-deliberative and self-critical, with every possibility to reinvent themselves. Space and time can be further enhanced through possibility portals that are multi-disciplinary and that facilitate cross disciplinary alliances. Organisational management structures need to facilitate this perpetual constructing of academic identities through awareness of the factors that encourage this process. Finally, there is a need for each higher level institution to reshape the understanding of 'academic identity' and to support each academic in defining his or her own teaching and research agendas.

Limitations of this Study

The grounded theory that is presented here is limited by my lack of expertise in the grounded theory process. This study was methodologically true to Glaserian grounded theory; and every attempt was made to be coherent and methodical. If I were to embark on another grounded theory study, I feel now that I would be more confident with the process and more patient concerning the emergence of the main concern and the developement of the core category. The academics within this present study were university based and there is a need to cast the net more widely and gain a greater perspective on academics working within other forms of education to enrich and potentially

modify the theory. There is a need to look at more types of possibility portals rather than just the Graduate Diploma in University Teaching and Learning. Focusing on other possibility portals would also further enrich the theory.

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