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Collaborative Reflections on using Island Maps to express new Lecturers' academic Identity

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Collaborative Reflections on using Island Maps to express new Lecturers' academic Identity

New lecturers may find the notion of academic identity difficult to grasp, yet it potentially provides them with a means of revealing issues of self, career and work-life balance. In this paper, we introduce an innovative research strategy and democratic research framework which have enabled us to explore new lecturers' academic identities in self-revelatory ways. This collaborative inquiry was undertaken by two teaching staff and four former students of a postgraduate certificate in higher education professional practice at a UK post-92 university. Through our innovative research strategy, one's academic identity is conceptualised as the map of an island featuring actual or potential personal characteristics, qualities and interests. The visual metaphors and clustering of these attributes, together with individuals' reflective commentaries on creating their own academic identity maps, lead us tentatively to characterise four alternative expressions of identity: the *multifaceted whole*, the *layered self*, the *interlinked self* and the *fragmented self*.

Keywords: academic identity, early-career academic, map, PgC, reflection, visual metaphor

Introduction

It is unusual for new lecturers joining the academy to be aware of academic identity theory (Wilson, 2013), yet most would articulate who they are by naming their institution, their discipline and their role. These are the essentials of academic identity, according to Taylor (1999), and like him we often hear self-descriptions along the lines 'I'm a post-grad engineer from the University of X'. The dynamic social process of 'becoming' an academic, through interaction with the multiple communities which comprise our workplace, is less readily understood. The collaborative research we report in this paper builds on our efforts to address this gap in early-career knowledge and to provide new lecturers with a means of revealing issues of self, career and work-life balance. Our aim was to evaluate the efficacy of a strategy that encourages early-career academics to reflect on their identity at different stages along a learning process. Such reflection addresses the tensions and ambiguity experienced in academic life that have been widely recognised, for example by Bolden, Gosling, O'Brien, Peters, Ryan and Haslam (2012), who identify:

"the notion of academic life as inherently 'bipolar'. This term was [used] to refer to the sense of being pulled in different directions, and experiencing different emotions, simultaneously. People felt both connected to and disconnected from their academic institutions and disciplines; empowered by their teaching and research abilities, but alienated from power within the institution. A number of participants expressed an almost love-hate relationship with various aspects of their work" (p. 22).

Our own research complements existing studies of identity amongst new lecturers (for example, McAlpine & Åkerlind, 2010; Smith, 2010) while breaking new ground by involving the participants themselves as co-researchers. We present four individuals' reflective commentaries on visualisations of their own identity which take the form of a 'map' of an island. Our discussion considers both the reflective and visual dimensions of our strategy; and relates emerging themes to relevant international research. Four possible alternative

expressions of identity emerge from this study, the *multifaceted whole*, the *layered self*, the *interlinked self* and the *fragmented self*. We conclude that the island map is a potentially self-revelatory means of expressing academic identity which new lecturers may find useful when used in conjunction with reflection.

Academic Identity and the Visual Metaphor of the Academic Island

Academic identity has grown into an important area of educational research, yet remains a “slippery” concept (Billot, 2010, p. 719; Lawler, 2008, p. 1). The literature approaches academic identity from a range of theoretical, disciplinary and role perspectives, creating new insights but also adding to the difficulty of grasping the concept. Taylor (1999, p. 43) contends that identity gives one “a sense of belonging, a feeling of personal significance and a sense of continuity and coherence”, and that one’s *academic* identity combines aspects relating to the employer, to the discipline and to popular conceptions of how academics ‘should’ be. To Lawler (2008, p. 5), identity comes down to “sameness and difference”, that is, our self-identification with particular social categories (even if they appear contradictory), and our perception of the particular attributes that make us unique. Henkel (2000) argues that academic identity develops dynamically out of an individual’s *distinctiveness* (by dint of their history, values and social ‘goods’) and their participation in the disciplinary and institutional communities in which they are *embedded*. These communities “have their own languages, conceptual structures, histories, traditions, myths, values, practices and achieved goods” (Henkel, 2000, p. 16). King (2013, p. 97) suggests that “[a]cademic identity concerns how we see ourselves, and how others see us, within the higher education world”. Although one may experience academic identity as unified and fixed, it is generally theorised as fragmented and evolving in response to the changing nature of our academic environment and our interactions with others (Henkel, 2000). For new academics, particularly those joining from established careers in their disciplinary sector, one difficulty lies in fusing disciplinary identity with other facets of the academic role (Wilson, 2013). A growing number of researchers report on troubled academic lived experiences as institutions, disciplines and the public perception of academics have evolved in response to marketisation and other global and national trends (for example, Billot, 2010; Clegg, 2008). Smith’s (2010) finding that over half of her sample of 23 probationary lecturers experienced a problematic transition into the academy and troublesome attainment of an academic identity prompted our desire to explore how this transition was experienced in our institution.

The adoption in our research of the visual metaphor of an ‘island’ of academic identity, captures our innate separateness, as ‘distinctive individuals’ (Henkel, 2000). However, each island is set in seas that link us to our colleagues, institution and discipline, and, potentially, to other communities in which we are embedded. Recently, the ‘tribes and territories’ metaphor which Becher (1989) coined to represent the academic workplace has been questioned. A more apposite metaphor of ‘academic oceans’ is suggested by Manathunga and Brew (2012) because it avoids the tacit imperialism and aggressive notions which ‘tribes and territories’ may imply. Our island metaphor suggests that while changes in the world around us may touch us, like an island’s topography, some aspects of our identity may prove more resistant to change than others.

The mapping academic identity strategy was first developed for use with members of a post graduate certificate (PgC) in Higher Education Professional Practice (HEPP). The strategy was inspired by the chance discovery of the 2004 etching ‘Map of an Englishman’ by the British artist, Grayson Perry RA. Perry is reported to have said of this work, “I was thinking of a map of my mind [...]. It was a stream-of-consciousness process with word

associations” (Klein 2009, p. 185). The result, in Perry’s case, was an apparently old-fashioned map of an island where topographical-feature names are both provocative and personal. On our PgC HEPP, three separate cohorts have undertaken the process of creating a composite ‘Map of an Academic Practitioner’. The groups’ drawings reveal only those aspects of identity which their members are prepared to share. Harper (2005) suggests that this ease of inclusion and exclusion is a key advantage of drawing over photography, despite the latter’s dominance in visual research. Austin (2010) reports visual elicitation as a powerful means of expressing early-career academic experiences. Given the personal nature of identity, we were encouraged by Prosser’s (2012) suggestion that a key benefit of visual research is that “[p]articipants feel less pressured when discussing sensitive topics through intermediary artifacts” (p. 484). Hence, in this study, we were interested in ascertaining the extent to which our strategy might draw out aspects of individuals’ academic life otherwise difficult to express. We anticipated that the text within an identity map would capture the creator as an academic “through what has been included and what omitted, where the content is positioned and how it is clustered” (King, 2013, p. 100).

Research Framework

Our collaborative research approach respects each individual’s interpretation of reality, and enables us to co-create new knowledge. The opportunity to join the project was offered to all 50 members of the host university’s 2011–2012 PgC HEPP cohort. Potential participants were made aware that involvement would enable them to gain insights into educational research such as how participants in such a study feel, and that it would help to deepen their understanding of academic identity – their own and others’ – whilst providing the opportunity to understand their practice further and to unsurface career aspirations. The four who elected to join the project exemplify the heterogeneity of the cohort through their spread of experience and disciplinary differences. The study obtained internal ethical clearance on the understanding that former students would have completed their PgC before contributing as individuals. Participants were made aware before committing to the project that their individual maps and reflections would be shared, analysed, discussed and disseminated. We therefore acknowledge that these contributions were created in the knowledge of possible future public scrutiny. We contend that this does not invalidate our data; on the contrary, this acknowledgement adds to the trustworthiness of our study in which individuals share their personal insights without the mediation of a third party ‘researcher’. In balancing our principle of protecting privacy (allowing co-inquirers to determine what they make public) with that of offering reciprocity (naming our co-inquirers as co-authors) we have strived for “worthwhile knowledge” (Hammersley & Traianou, 2012, p. 6). We feel we have achieved this jointly. Despite the right to withdraw, all the study team members remained with the project to the end because of a growing interest in the topic and in the study’s outcomes.

The project comprised three phases. First, each of the four former students contributed a personal map and a short written reflection on what this said about their academic identity. We then met to share this work and, together, to make sense of what was emerging from these personal stories. The second phase involved the map-makers being introduced to contemporary literature on the theme of academic identity and, following engagement with this and other chosen literature, revisiting their maps. We hoped that this phase would deepen reflections by making connections between the literature and personal insights. The final stage involved meeting to review collective findings and to use these to draw conclusions from the individual stories, personal learning journeys and the final representations of academic identity. This discussion revealed rich insights not only from the drawings but also from the iterative reflection process.

The Academic Identity Maps

Creation Process

Our maps were created by each person working alone. The guidance was first to ‘think of yourself as an island’; then to ‘think of the attributes that define you as an academic practitioner’ writing each on a separate sticky-note or creating a digital list. The next step was to ‘cluster the attributes and locate them on your island’, and finally to ‘draw the island outline round them (or draw the island first and then locate the attributes, if that seems right)’. According to our preference, we used any suitable software or hand-drew the map. We documented the creation process, again according to personal preference, for example by videoing it or by photographing the map as it evolved.

Raymond’s Map and Reflections

My working week is divided between practicing as a registered nurse in my local NHS trust and teaching as a seconded clinical skills instructor at university. I have always assumed that these two roles were completely separate. In the mapping academic identity exercise, this assumption led me to consciously draw an island and add ‘sticky notes’ which omitted attributes that I felt were pertinent only to my role as a registered nurse, and to concentrate instead on my role as an academic practitioner.

Compared to my colleagues’ maps, my island now appears to me to be regimented and compartmental. The left-hand cluster focuses on providing an enjoyable learning experience for students; the centre cluster is populated by attributes that derive from my training on the PgC HEPP. Compassion, empathy, help, advice and passion are clustered in the right-hand corner of my academic island which lies in calm seas. These are attributes necessary in a nursing tutor and which nursing students must develop; however, Savage (1995) claims they are also highly desirable personal elements in a nurse’s repertoire and contribute greatly to the art of nursing. The map has therefore proved revelatory in that, what I originally thought of as academic practitioner’s qualities could now be interpreted as what I would expect from my own nursing practice when dealing with patients. This suggests an unconscious multiple-role mindset with overlapping clinical and academic identities.

The left and middle columns of my island map may reflect my rigid clinical stance in teaching a set of clinical skills to both first and second year pre-registration nursing students which result in an Objective Structured Clinical Examination (OSCE). These skills are taught and practiced in a university laboratory prior to the student practicing the skill on a real patient in the clinical setting. Within the pre-registration nursing context, clinical skill imitation employing motor skills remains imperative to patient safety and the students cannot deviate from the strict exam criteria in order to gain a pass. Thus, teaching clinical skills lies in contention with other areas of the nursing curricula and other higher education disciplines where creativity and problem solving are seen to be powerful tools of learning (Minton, 2005).

The lack of detail in my map concerning my home life, ambition and personal life may be influenced by my professional approach of non-disclosure when nursing the sick patient (Savage, 1995). This lack of disclosure could also indicate my tentative start as a newly qualified lecturer, forming my academic identity within the higher education context independently of my clinical and personal identity.



Figure 1: Raymond's map showing three main clusters of attributes

My academic identity map has provided me with a visual reference to my place as a subject-specific academic who, it appears, has complementary interchangeable skills which I had assumed were distinct from each other. The surprise for me in this project is this recognition of similarities in the interpersonal areas of my academic practice and nursing practice.

Alexeis's Map and Reflections

Early reflections on the specifics of my academic identity led me to outlining three key concepts. These were: the variety of roles I perform both at work and outside of the University, their overlapping nature and the drivers and outcomes of such roles. A review of the literature later revealed that the relationships between academic roles and their drivers and outcomes have been studied for at least two decades by authors such as Peterson (1998) and Henkel (2000).

First steps in defining my own academic identity were therefore aimed at identifying my key roles. While doing so, it became apparent that my own academic identity is defined not only by my work as an academic but also by my role within both my family and my inner circle of friends. How were these roles related then?

My role within a young family may not differ significantly from that of many of my colleagues who might be within the same age range or career stage. Satisfying the needs of the family is an intensive process which takes many forms and provides the rewards that drive, at least bodily and emotionally, my efforts to climb a professional ladder. This is why I see only a fine line separating concepts such as wellness, hobbies, or time with family and friends, from what could be referred to as 'work'.

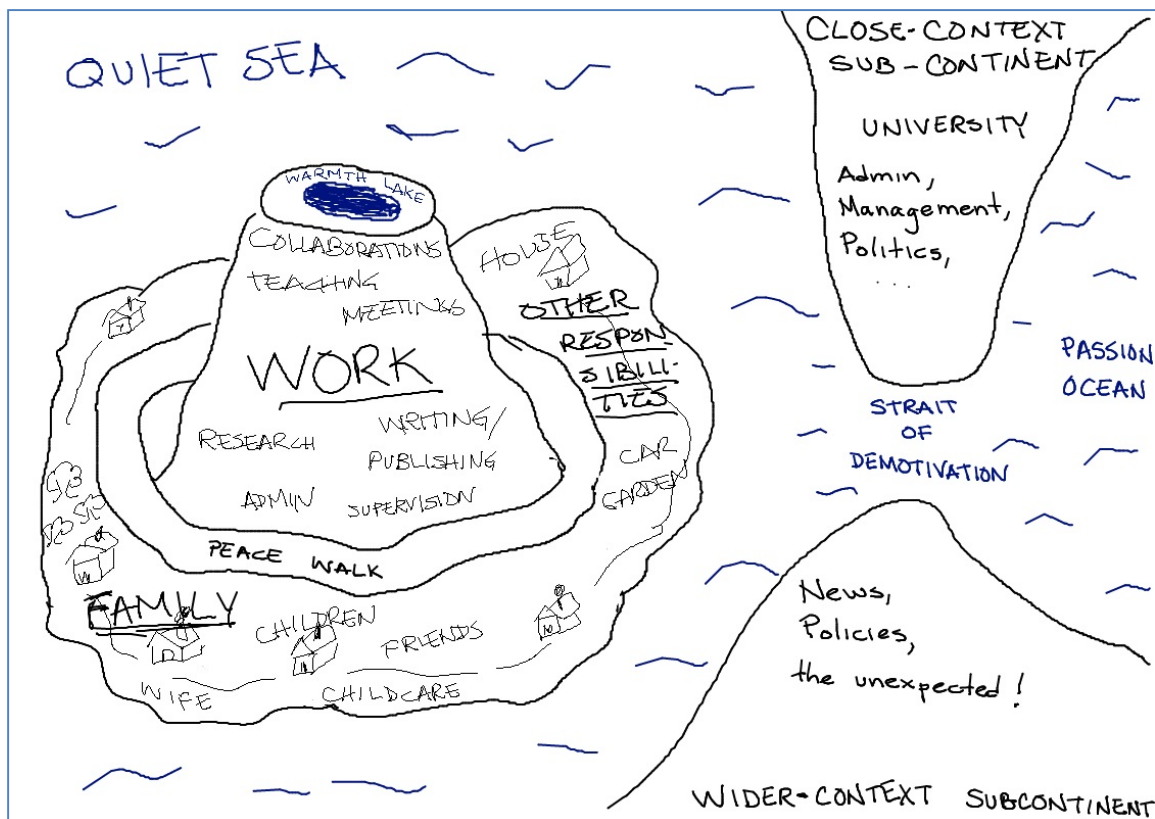


Figure 2: The first of Alexis's two contrasting identity maps

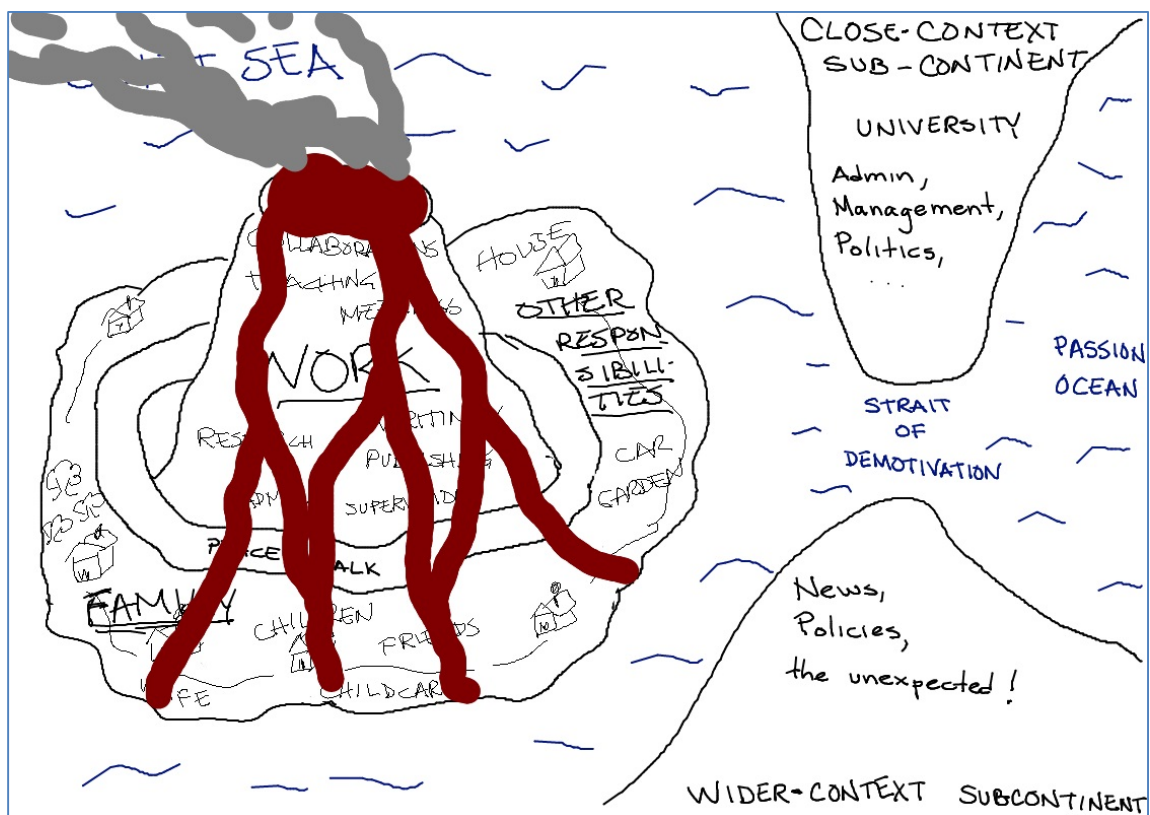


Figure 3: Alexis's second map depicting work-overload

My work as an academic involves many responsibilities which cannot be encapsulated within the terms 'teaching' and 'research'. If my roles were to coexist in an island, work would grow at the centre of its topography and would be clearly visible for everyone involved. My work

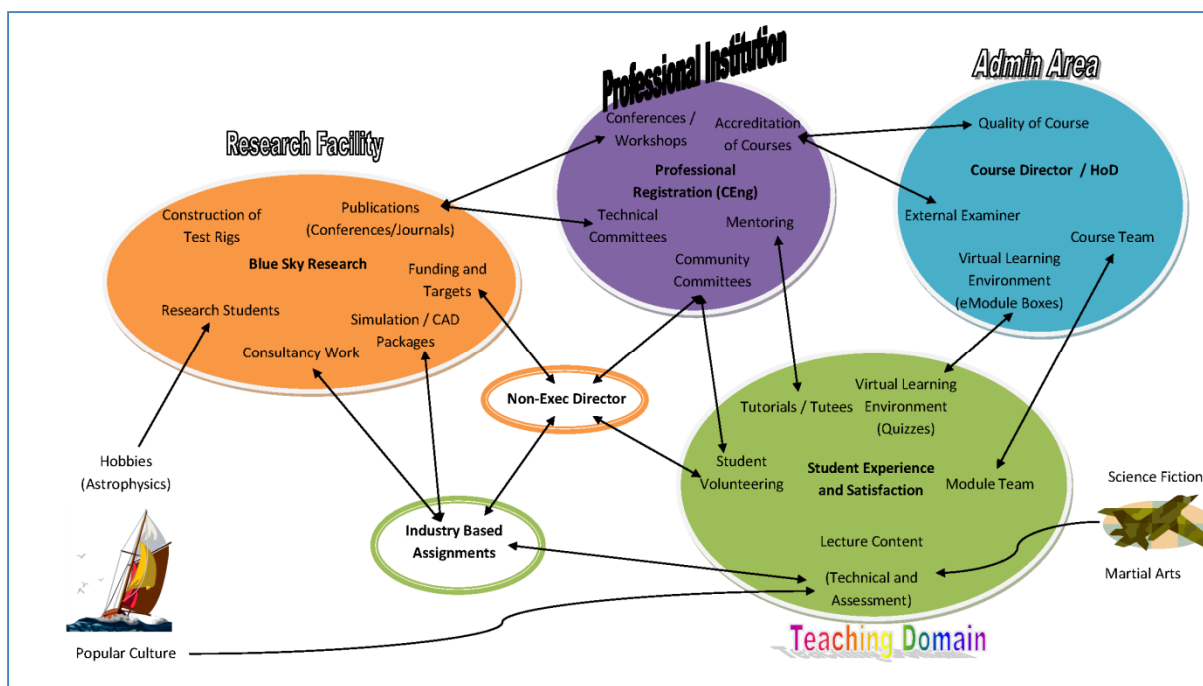


Figure 5: Andrew's final map

Now I will describe how the map was constructed. Research Facility Island was the first to be placed along with its capital, Blue Sky Research, and other aspects such as consultancy, simulations, research students, etc. surrounding it. There was a little island off the coast called Research Informed that provides a direct link to Teaching Domain, the next island. This allowed ideas from consultancy work to inspire assessments, thus providing students with up-to-date examples of recent products and research in the field. The capital of Teaching Domain is Student Experience which is the ultimate aim of my teaching: to provide knowledge in a stimulating and interesting way for knowledge retention and enjoyment. Tutorials link to Mentoring on Professional Institution Land and to that island's capital, Professional Registration advice. On the other side of Professional Institution Land lies Accreditation which, due to the nature of the degree, assists in the professional registration process and which links to the Admin Area island, particularly its courses, external examiners and access to VLEs. This last, links back to teaching via online resources used by the teaching team. The teaching team links to the course team on the Admin Area for the development and continuous update of the course for the benefit of students. The Course Director or "HoD" [Head of Department] would then be the capital of the Admin Area. Finally, my hobbies are represented as ships that sail between the islands and benefit all areas so that my enthusiasm and real world perspective come across. In the final version, one of these has become a jet plane.

The most unexpected outcome was that I initially thought research would be in the centre, with administration, teaching and everything else surrounding it. I was surprised to find this rather complicated network of connections between all the differing areas. I believe that it demonstrates the magnitudes of skills required to be a lecturer in a modern university, and also relates to the time, work/life balance and stress issues mentioned previously.

Charlotte's Map and Reflections

My academic island map has undergone a series of developmental changes. It started by identifying emotions, generic roles and responsibilities (Figure 6 and Figure 7) and progressed into identifying career goals and ambitions (Figure 8). The adolescent state of 'identity moratorium' (or identity crisis) (Erikson, 1968 quoted in Wigfield & Wagner, 2005)

describes me at the start of the mapping process. Yet to reach a state of ‘identity achievement’ (Marcia, 1980 quoted in Wigfield & Wagner, 2005), I needed to explore options and roles to develop a coherent identity. My path from identity moratorium to identity achievement was gained with the help of a community of researchers that highlighted my need for motivation and increased self-confidence. This cognitive developmental change has been part of my growth to competence (Wigfield & Wagner, 2005), and has given me direction and focus in my new career from being the pupil to becoming the educator. The maps identified the scattered nature of my tasks and teaching topics which was restricting the development and focus that I needed to see a future and a career path. This process has enabled me to identify areas of interest and to identify the next steps.

Being a female in engineering has often made me question if it is because I am in a minority that I strive to work hard and to push myself or if it is just my personality traits and good organisation skills that have led me into this quick career progression. I think that at this present point I work hard to prove myself because of my age and because of the experience from working in the industry that I feel I lack and hope that I will gain in the near future to gain a distinctive individual identity.

Working hard in my academic job has led to an extremely fast progression in my roles and responsibilities from teaching assistant to lecturer to course director in the space of two years. I have had little time to settle into a role before being given more responsibilities. With limited time in each position I have missed out on the time that I needed to build my own self-belief in the roles. Through this mapping process I have been able to develop self-confidence by identifying my positive traits and also areas for improvement for further development to take place.

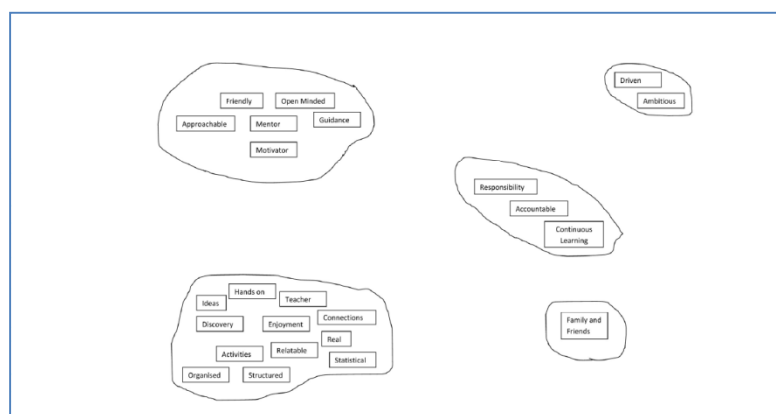


Figure 6: First version of Charlotte's map

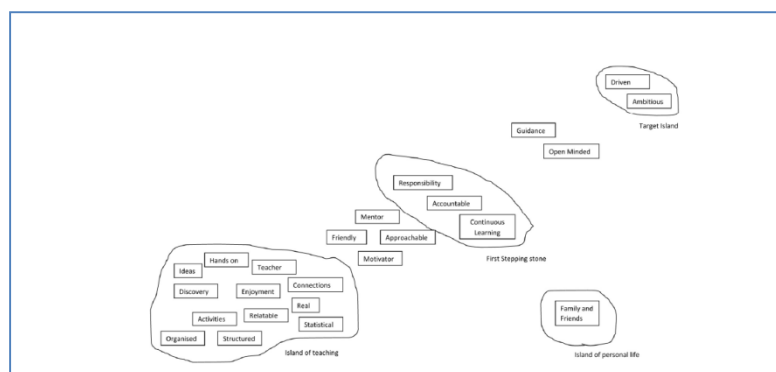


Figure 7: Charlotte's updated map

ingenious is clearly demonstrated by these maps. But do the maps themselves exemplify a capacity for capturing high quality and truthful data? Potentially, yes. The reflective pieces which accompany the maps each suggest that the visualisation is consistent with the author's self-view, although, in each case, the map has extended the author's understanding of his or her academic identity.

The mapping and reflecting process reveals certain characteristics in common – engagement in multiple roles, acknowledgement of multiple drivers, a passion for the discipline or subject, and a wealth of expertise. These characteristics are also distinguishable in the maps created by groups on the PgC HEPP. The map structures also resonate with the group maps, leading us to conjecture that it is not discipline, but self-view which determines how identity is visualised. This study has enabled us to identify four possible self-views of academic identity, each represented by one of the map-authors. We will briefly review each contribution in turn, considering it in the light of relevant international research findings.

Raymond's reflections on his dual professional-academic role revealed that certain academic traits he valued were also key to his nursing persona. This echoes findings in a UK study of professional and academic identity by Findlow (2012) where several nursing lecturer-practitioners found that "drawing on their practical *nursing* identities, which embodied ideals of holistic care, gave them the best sense of what they were doing and why" (p. 131, original emphasis). In Raymond's case, these traits-in-common suggest the successful fusion of discipline with teaching and learning which Wilson (2013) promotes. Discussing his map, and comparing it with those of his colleagues, led Raymond to reflect on his exclusion of home-life attributes from his map, and to relate this to understandings of professional reserve in nursing. Thus, despite these omissions, we named this academic identity perspective, the *multifaceted whole*. It is interesting, that Raymond was the only map-author to draw the island outline before adding his attributes. In discussion, he explained that he simply followed the guidance given and drew a generic island, confident that the attributes would 'fit'. His reflections reveal the importance in his teaching of adherence to procedural steps which this response appears to mirror.

Alexeis's map captures a three-dimensional view of his identity in which work-life dominates home-life. He divides the two with a 'peace walk' which represents the journey from home to work and back again. However, the most powerful aspect of his map is the explosion of lava over his island as work-life overwhelms everything else. As noted earlier, concern about work/life balance is a key theme explored by Austin (2010) in studying early career academics in the United States. She suggests that lack of time is an issue for academics at all levels, but that senior academics may "not understand the pressures on early career colleagues to fit personal as well as professional responsibilities into their schedules" (Austin, 2010, p. 28). From an Irish perspective, Lynch (2010, p. 57) suggests there is an expectation in higher education that academics "work unregulated and long hours; it is part of their apprenticeship. To be a successful academic is to be unencumbered by caring". No wonder that this map portrays such dissonance, given the importance which Alexeis ascribes to both his family care and his work. Although no sense of his disciplinary field is given, Alexeis's map represents the institutional and the wider world through its 'sub-continent' which are set in a 'Passion Ocean' and threatened by a 'Strait of Demotivation'. This specificity of language recalls Macfarlane's (2012) metaphorical map of the higher education archipelago, although Alexeis was not familiar with Macfarlane's when he drew his map. In capturing so many different levels of academic identity, we named the perspective that Alexeis's map represents, the *layered self*.

Andrew chose to portray the fullness of his academic life through the scale of his identity map which covers two horizontal sheets of flip-chart paper (Figure 4). The revised version of his map (Figure 5) serves to make partially hidden content and hand-written notes legible. However, this digitised version loses some of the intricacy which distinguishes the original. Andrew's map visualises the integration of his workplace commitments with the hobbies that inform his teaching and research. This represents an academic life with, as he told the group, "no down-time". Thus the multiple commitments of his current role are drawn as separate islands linked statically by railways and bridges, and dynamically by the light from his lighthouse and by boats and planes. We named this academic identity perspective, the *interlinked self*. Andrew has used the literature to make sense of his identity map, rather as Brooman and Darwent's (2012) students used directed-reading to assist in the analysis of their personal development. For example, he recognises "the joys and challenges of transitioning from being a doctoral student to being a faculty member" discussed by Austin (2010, p. 18). When Andrew displayed his map to the group, he explained that his long-established ambition to be an academic derived from an inspirational professorial role-model who balanced management, teaching and research, providing the kind of 'boundary-spanning' academic leadership sought by the interviewees of Bolden et al. (2012). In his current role, Andrew's appointment as a non-executive director enables him to integrate teaching and research in a way that supports the host university's mission and reward process. In this way, he is seeking to develop his own boundary-spanning activity.

Charlotte's initial map comprised separate islands, which, unlike Andrew's, were not linked together. This representation surprised her. Rather like Smith's (2010, p. 585) participants, she had found a "disjuncture between expectation and lived reality". We named this self-view, the *fragmented self*. Charlotte addressed her discomfort by reflecting further upon her identity and by redrawing her map. This second version captures a sense of journey – from where she is to where she wants to be – with her personality traits forming the connections between 'stepping-stone' islands. After our first meeting in which we shared and discussed our maps, she reviewed her role, priorities and ambitions once more. Her third map includes plans as well as current activities, commitments and attributes. Her identity has become interlinked through this process which she has likened to development from adolescence to adulthood, echoing King (2013).

Conclusion

During this study, we encountered several researchers who challenged our approach. For example, one suggested that Andrew's inclusion of railway-links between islands, and Alexeis's addition of sub-continentals alongside his island, demonstrated the inadequacy of the island metaphor to express academic identity. While we contest this, we are exploring metaphorical expressions of academic identity in collaboration with this critic. Another researcher queried the different ways our maps capture emotions. Charlotte places these attributes in the sea, whereas Raymond treats them like any other island-based attribute. The visual representation of emotions and their importance to academic identity provide interesting areas for future research.

The current study has led us to conjecture that it is not discipline but self-view which determines how identity is visualised. Thus we propose four possible characterisations of academic identity: the *multifaceted whole*, the *layered self*, the *interlinked self* and the *fragmented self*. Each new PgC HEPP cohort offers us the opportunity to explore these characterisations further. Prosser (2012, p. 493) contends that "visual methods can reveal important information that text or word-based methods cannot". We have found the process

of creating a map of academic identity to be both powerful and self-revelatory. The visualisation process and subsequent *reflection-on-action* (Schön, 1983) helped us to appreciate the academic identity concept, and to uncover issues of self, career and work life balance. In Charlotte's case, this has resulted in *reflection-for-action* (Thompson & Pascal, 2012), that is, the development of informed career plans. We have enjoyed this interdisciplinary study and hope others find our research thought-provoking. We would be pleased to hear from colleagues who use the island map approach in their teaching or research.

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