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Academic Futures: Inquiries into Higher Education and Pedagogy

Edited by

iPED Research Network

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CHAPTER FIVE

"I" AND "WE": INDIVIDUAL IDENTITY WITHIN COMMUNITIES OF INQUIRY

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Keywords

collegiality; community of practice; force-field analysis; participatory action research; pedagogical research

Introduction

This chapter draws on our experiences of a multi-faceted change strategy in a modern university, in the UK. The strategy has involved simultaneously fostering a newly emerging community of inquiry and facilitating the transformation of the academic identities of individuals within that community; two aspirations that are at times held in tension. Each of three authors has a shared role as an academic and as a research fellow and hence we embody this tension.

The challenges and potential for researching how ideas are shared, and how communities are built around common interests in the context of a higher education institution, are extensive. This is particularly so in the context of an institution undergoing a process of restructuring that is designed to bring about cultural change within the organisation, and more specifically to generate increased research capacity amongst its academic staff. Within this milieu, issues of identity, identification and communities of practice provide a conceptual focus for the chapter, which charts the development of a community at periodic intervals. Two vignettes are used

to illustrate differing perspectives on the embryonic community. From these insights we identify the dominant discourses impacting on the initiative, which is set against a backdrop of an increasingly individualistic and managerial academic world where the notion of collegiality can be troublesome. We conclude by suggesting that academics are operating strategically, balancing the perceived imperative to develop individual profiles, whilst simultaneously actively trying to promote an emergent pedagogical research community.

Background

The community of inquiry which we refer to as the "inquiring pedagogies or iPED community" provides a focus for this chapter. It was established in 2005 with the aim of strengthening pedagogical research capacity within Coventry University. The realisation of this strategy coincided with a period in which support for disciplinary research was restricted to a limited number of subject areas due to an institutional focus on the rapidly approaching UK Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) of 2008. The expectation underpinning the pedagogical research initiative was that increased research activity would enhance professional standards in teaching practice by promoting reflective and evaluative approaches to curriculum development and delivery. The initiative was spearheaded by three half-time research fellows and several educational developers based in a Centre, which was itself changing to focus increasingly on research as well as on development.

Notwithstanding an ambition for the community to be inclusive of a range of pedagogical approaches and research methodologies, a number of inter-connected foci were identifiable due to the existing strengths and historical developments in the institution. For instance, an earlier large-scale capacity-building initiative at the University where the focus was on innovative practices (Deepwell and Beaty 2005, Beaty and Cousin 2003) led to defining the online learning environment that has since become deeply embedded within the culture of the organization, highlighting a particular strength in technology enhanced learning. Similarly, the inception of the Centre for Academic Writing (Ganobcsik-Williams 2006) has led to a strong emphasis on teaching and researching writing in the disciplines. Other areas of particular pedagogical focus include research-led learning, work-based learning, scenario-based learning and the use of realistic work environments.

The initiative sought to draw on these strengths and raise the quality and quantity of pedagogic research projects across the institution. Tensions

in fostering the change initiative typify the research, teaching and development nexus, in which connections are contentious (Wareham and Trowler 2007). Given the prejudices against pedagogical research and doubts as to its credibility, largely due to descriptive and anecdotal accounts that claim the status of research while lacking external verification and location in a wider knowledge context (Baume and Beaty 2006), the expectation of an enhanced institutional profile and the generation of hard outcomes consistent with an enterprise culture were ambitious. The initiative created challenges with respect to finding the best way of supporting individuals so that their gains were process as well as product focused. As key players in the initiative, we attempted to realize this aim by nurturing a collegial community, whilst simultaneously acknowledging that the uncompetitive philosophy underpinning collegiality was at odds with our institution's primary drivers for success, which were individualistic.

Baseline data on academic identities

Early on in our discussions, we identified the need to gather some baseline data on academic identity within the institutional community as a whole. Senior management changes had precipitated a shift in focus for the institution towards more business-oriented or "third stream" activities and measures to ensure higher levels of graduate employment alongside greater emphasis on research achievements. We were interested to find out how this new, more competitive, emphasis was affecting perceptions of the role, and ultimately the identities, of academic colleagues. We recognised that collaborating on a piece of research in itself ran counter to this prevailing trend and that in the process there were possible implications for how we formulated our own identities within the emergent pedagogic research community.

In early 2006, therefore, we launched an online survey for academic colleagues from our University. We received over 70 responses from a total population, including part-time colleagues, of over 800. Whilst statistically this does not represent a high return rate (<10%), the quality of the responses to the open-ended questions was sufficiently detailed for us to identify some common threads around the notion of academic identity. The responses were analysed in order to identify thematic clusters in the way in which academics represented themselves. The tensions mentioned earlier were apparent and our analysis indicates a pull between **ambition** (their own personal ambition and that observed in others); **autonomy** (being "outside the system in a critical sense"; freedom, but also lack of

guidance); **administration** (excessive bureaucracy and an inescapable audit culture) and **altruism** (desire to share knowledge and expertise, nurture students' development and improve society at large). These facets are represented graphically in Figure 5.1.

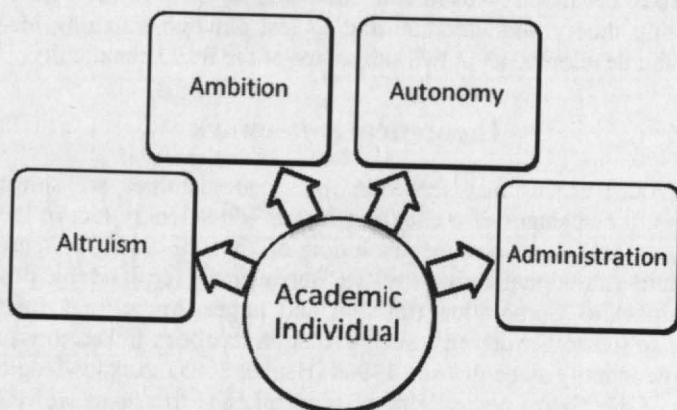


Figure 5-1: Elements of academic identity from the scoping survey

The survey revealed that, for our colleagues, the most frequently cited motivations for working in higher education were: to improve society, to share expertise and knowledge and to exercise autonomy in their professional lives. These findings broadly concur with those of a large-scale funded study into the Higher Education workforce in the UK, which cites "autonomy, independence and enjoyment of research and/or teaching" as the major reasons for becoming an academic (Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) 2006).

One of these facets is closely associated with academic identity, namely autonomy (Clegg 2008; Henkel 2005). In our survey autonomy was found to have both positive and negative associations; some academic colleagues experienced frustration at a perceived lack of guidance and support, while others appreciated the freedom afforded by the loose management alluded to above. Certainly in agreement with Clegg's research findings autonomy did not appear to be compromised in the context of the "corporate enterprise" culture. Despite acknowledging ambitions, which might be associated with contemporary individualistic culture, many respondents displayed altruistic tendencies in wishing to advance development of both students and their colleagues.

We suggest that rather than finding a notable tension between the notion of higher education as a commercial enterprise and the personal

beliefs of respondents on the purpose of higher education and their role within it, staff were finding elements of the new culture with which they could identify and were positioning themselves accordingly. We wanted to explore in more detail how this was playing out in practice. Therefore, the next step in our inquiry was to both contextualise these findings in relation to existing theory and literature and to test out our emerging ideas by examining developments in two subgroups of the iPED community.

Theoretical framework

Tight (2003) argues that academic roles and identities are shifting in response to challenges of a changing higher education system in the UK. McNay (1995) describes the evolution of the university system from Collegium (traditional university) to Bureaucracy (typified by post '92 universities) to Corporation (mission and target driven) and finally to Enterprise (customer driven). Such evolution has been linked to issues of academic identity since the mid 1990s (Henkel 2005). Acknowledging the impact of the "brave new world" of academia and the stress which many academic staff experience as a result of over-long hours and work pressure, Fanghanel and Trowler (2008: 308) quote one academic saying that she thought her university operated " 'with a kind of superman/superwoman model' where the realities of academic work were not properly acknowledged". Conceptualizations of academic work are clearly diverse. However, "academic productivity", which is part of growing trends towards managerialism and performativity in the UK, places greater emphasis on research outputs and brings with it more reporting and more bureaucracy (Becher and Trowler 2001). Recognizing that "the success of English higher education depends upon the skills and dedication of its staff, who are faced with increasing expectations from a range of stakeholders", the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE 2006: 3) discusses the potential to damage the pay and intrinsic reward balance that has led to traditionally low turnover rates. Perhaps most significantly it highlights problems associated with "individual freedoms [being] perceived as increasingly constrained" (HEFCE: 45). In agreement, Henkel (2005: 172) argues that "[a]utonomy is integrally related to academic identity", yet it is increasingly difficult to maintain as universities restructure themselves as "corporate enterprises". Clegg's (2008) research findings are somewhat more uplifting. Despite the pressure of performativity and the fact that "how to be a proper academic is a moving goal; fraught with ambiguity" Clegg (2008: 336) found that individuals created spaces for "principled personal autonomy and agency"

(ibid: 329). She is less expansive on the possibilities for contemporary collegiality ostensibly characteristic of the culture of the traditional university.

Collegiality resonates with the concept of a community of practice (Wenger 1998), which incorporates three essential elements; relationship building is crucial, a shared repertoire of concepts, tools, language or stories must be nurtured and there is a need for a sense of joint enterprise. Given the pedagogical experience of academic staff who might be expected to join such a community it seems likely that shared interests will engage individuals, leading to new relationships being established and the forging of a sense of joint enterprise. Favourable conditions can be created to facilitate community building (Cousin and Deepwell 2005; Deepwell and King 2008). However, much depends on the individual and the ways in which they identify with the community and this impacts subsequently on the extent to which they choose to become assimilated into that community. Woodward (1997) refers to differential positioning and the ways in which we each shape and are shaped through our positioning in terms of social categories that can be inclusive as well as exclusive. By upholding the belief in inclusivity in the inquiring pedagogies community we recognised we might draw in more individuals while risking diluting the potential for identification and the development of a shared repertoire. Identification with and assimilation into a community form a dynamic between structure and agency that raises questions about individual identity and where it fits into this dynamic.

Methodology

Our work has developed iteratively through discussion of our varying approaches to research and our separate and interlinked inquiries into identity within the context of this community. The work presented in this chapter has emerged from an analysis of different studies to draw out ideas about identification and community. In so doing we have adopted the stance of discourse analysis to interpret beyond the written or spoken word to create meaning using our insights and background knowledge (Denscombe 2007: 308). This approach encourages us to be mindful of our own previous experiences and the interpretations of others as we attempt to make sense of the data. The discussion in this chapter is based on an initial collaboration of the research team, namely a scoping study into academic identity, and two separate pieces of research on subgroups of the iPED community, which are presented as vignettes. The first of these is an analysis of how the institutional shift towards research affected the team of

educational developers; the second focuses on a small group of academic staff with a specific interest in researching work-based learning. We were particularly concerned to learn whether or not academics were experiencing tensions and how they positioned themselves in relation to institutional discourses.

Identities under development: an analysis of an educational development team redefining itself as a research group

The first vignette focuses on a pedagogical research initiative emerging from within a team of experienced educational developers that saw itself as a community of practice. Educational developers in this context provide teaching and learning guidance within a Higher Education institution and foster innovations in curriculum and other professional and strategic academic development, including the use of learning technology. The purpose of the iPED research initiative was to build capacity in pedagogical research across the widest community of academic colleagues in the University. The educational development group was a relatively stable academic grouping with established patterns of communication and a strong sense of collegiality and mutual support. The group supported large and small-scale projects, ran courses, seminars and workshops, hosted an annual conference on teaching and learning, and had an active email list. Located outside of an academic department, the educational developers nonetheless experienced the tensions in academic identity emerging from the baseline survey, striking a careful balance between their own personal ambitions and their altruistic support for enhancing the successes of others. Scholarship underpinned the educational development work and the team had published and disseminated widely, often in collaboration with one another or with faculty members. The nature of the research undertaken by the group met the six criteria for scholarship proposed by Healey (2000): clear goals (the formulation of a question to be explored); adequate preparation; appropriate methods; significant results; effective presentation (to peers) and reflective critique.

The initial aim of the pedagogical research initiative was to maintain the powerful links between research and practice that had been established in educational development, whilst at the same time raising the research profile. On the face of it, this seemed logical and desirable. However, increasing awareness of the challenges that the new research climate posed, resulted in a sub-set of the group becoming interested in examining the situation more closely in order to make sense of how their identities

were changing (Courtney, Deepwell and Turner 2006). An action research approach enabled a high level of reflexivity and dialogue as it encourages collaboration and participation (Denscombe 2007).

A force field analysis (Lewin 1951) was used to identify the nature of the tensions and compromises between academic and professional identity experienced by members of the team. Two key areas emerged: values and recognition. The educational developers held strong beliefs and values about community, collaboration and scholarship in its broadest definition; these values are embodied in the mission statements of the UK professional bodies relating to staff and educational development (for example, the Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA) and the Higher Education Academy (HEA)). In practice, the developers were generous with their time and ideas. Within the pedagogical research initiative there was an implicit aim of building capacity across the widest possible community of academic colleagues in the University, which was in line with educational development values. Activities associated with the initiative included workshops on research methods, writing groups, visiting speakers, online support, mentoring, seminars and various guides to conducting research.

In the new reality of research ranking and income generation targets, the scholarships of discovery and engagement prevail over integration and teaching (Boyer 1990). Knowledge is something to have, rather than something to pass on, unless there is a consultancy fee attached. The research agenda thus proffered some very different values concerned with more individual reputation-building and securing income streams. For example, the need to cite "principal authors" was acknowledged as undermining the collaborative principles by which the group operated and thereby to risk devaluing the process and product of the group's research. Through reflective analysis of practice, individuals in the group were able to realize how they might navigate the new climate whilst preserving the integrity of their identity as educational developers. Continuing to identify with their educational development principles, the group has sustained efforts to seed and nurture pedagogical research. As such they have positioned themselves as change agents with a key role in the institutional initiative to enhance pedagogical research.

Communities tempered by ambition

The second vignette develops the notion of the troublesome nature of moving between personal positioning and being part of a community, which was considerably more evident in the embryonic work based

learning (WBL) subgroup of the iPED community than with the educational developers. WBL involves learning at higher education level derived from paid or unpaid work (Garnett 1997). Cairns and Stephenson (2002) suggest that it can involve learning for, at or through work. "Learning for work" usually involves work placements on sandwich degree or professional programmes. "Learning at work" is characterized by staff training initiatives provided in-house, which are rarely formally assessed or accredited. "Learning through work" involves the negotiation of a programme of study tailored to meet the needs of the learner and their own work context. From this definition it is clear that there are diverse conceptions of work-based learning. We might have predicted that the interest communities would be assorted. However, we underestimated the extent of disciplinary difference and the attendant power differentials that came into play in attempting to bring academics together to share ideas and research interests, even given insight into the tensions in academic identity emerging from the baseline survey.

A participatory action research approach was adopted in the formative stages of the development of the work-based learning research community. Data were collected through participant observation of face-to-face and email discussion and unstructured interviews with participants. Analysis of field notes and e-mail threads revealed issues of exclusion for one participant on the basis that s/he perceived that "learning for work" was dismissed as inferior to "learning through work". There were moral and ethical concerns about the sharing of ideas, possibly reflecting the individualising tendencies of the institutional climate as well as concern about whether being part of one community precluded being part of another, which resonates with the notion of "overlapping communities" (Lave and Wenger 1991, p.98). Discomfort with the notion of being subsumed within the group highlighted the perceived need to preserve autonomy, concurring with findings from the baseline survey, as well as a possible failure in relationship building.

With respect to electronic communication there were particular issues about the ease with which individuals could be intentionally or unintentionally excluded from discussions and what people were prepared to share and with whom, both of which interfere with identification. This possibly highlights the need for a different form of electronic emotional intelligence from that which operates in a face-to-face context. There was also evidence that individuals weigh the rewards and costs of becoming involved in new networks, waiting to see whether or not they will begin to demonstrate signs of success, presumably in terms of hard outputs, before committing. This highlights the individualising tendencies of ambition,

again reflecting findings from the baseline survey. However, it also emphasises the power of individual agency that influences assimilation into a community. The accepted wisdom that a developing community of practice needs to have a shared language and a level of agreement about concepts and tools (Lave and Wenger 1991) is strongly supported by the findings with respect to the work-based learning community. Pockets of work-based learning research and evaluation activity did develop, although this was largely small groups of academics forming micro-communities. These academic colleagues appear to have found a middle way between individualism and collectivism; between enhancing personal and professional identities without denying altruistic desires to share knowledge and expertise or foregoing the benefits of collegiality.

Discussion

The two vignettes presented above reveal the active choices that colleagues have to make in defining, or preserving, their academic identities. The educational developers chose to resist the forces driving towards individualistic reward in the research field; the work-based learning researchers show due caution before aligning themselves to the new community. Notwithstanding the fact that the educational developers were already a cohesive team in comparison with the WBL community, in both cases, there is an oscillation between the extent of assimilation and identification with communities, as shown graphically in Figure 5.2. This oscillation reflects the dynamic interplay between structure and individual agency which might be said to be contingent on contextual factors deemed essential for the development of a community of practice; namely joint enterprise, shared interests and relationship building.

The vignettes illustrate some of the elements of academic identity shown in Figure 5.1, namely altruism, autonomy and ambition. They paint a realistic picture of how academics position themselves in the current discourse of higher education. Drawing on notions of discrepancies between "espoused theories" and "theories in use" (Argyris 1991) one could argue that answering a questionnaire on academic identities is one thing; being put in a situation in which one needs to position oneself is another; individuals say they do one thing and behave differently. Nevertheless, as the vignettes indicate, the elements clearly hold a different sway in the context of different groups and relationships, which is reflected in the dynamic relationship illustrated in Figure 5.2. The extent of identification will impact on assimilation, which will vary from person to person. As in any professional role, choices have to be made; they are

likely to be transitory in the shifting milieu of contemporary higher education. Most of us are likely to be able to identify with Sennett's (2006) analogy of the workplace as a train station where contact with fellow travellers is short-term and random. However, our findings seem to suggest that academics are actively positioning themselves in this environment and creating spaces for communities to thrive. In other words, academics are not "helpless pawns in others' games" (Henkel 1987).

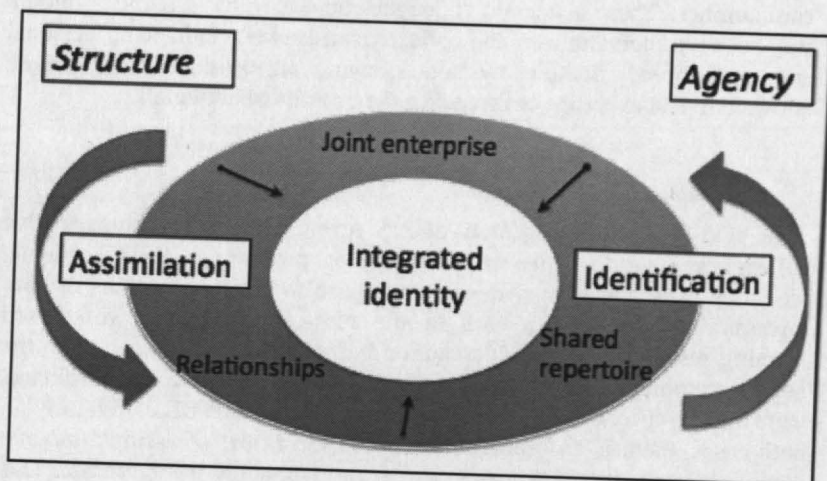


Figure 5-2: The iterative process of assimilation and integration

Clearly there are tensions between the notion of higher education as a commercial enterprise and the personal beliefs of respondents on the purpose of higher education and their role within it. Becher (1989, p. 91) argues that academic rivalry is increasing, overtly fuelling the "competitive nature of academic life" as the emphasis is placed on "gaining a professional reputation". Certainly, the tendency is to suggest that the institution has re-shaped academic colleagues as competitors, tasked as we each are with producing measurable outputs (gaining funding, generating publications and developing colleagues to do likewise). Nonetheless academic colleagues are finding elements of the new culture with which they can identify and are positioning themselves accordingly.

Conclusion: the academic as strategist

Sennett's (2006) advice is to accept change; to work with it rather than against it. This has been actualised in higher education through the proliferation in recent years of cooperative research environments and increased opportunity for collegiate networking provided by social networking software. Our analysis of academic identities, albeit confined to small groups in one institution, seems to suggest that academics are certainly working with these changes. They are strategists actively managing their careers; they have their own visions and interests but are proactive in anticipating future trends. They have mentors or groups of trusted colleagues with whom they work and are able to find ways to present what they enjoy doing within the performative culture. We conclude by acknowledging that our collaborative research has encouraged us to review our own personal values and aspirations, as we have learned from colleagues. We exist within and are better able to anticipate the demands of the "entrepreneurial academy" (McNay 1995) and continue to be mindful of promoting the emergent pedagogical research community, whilst not neglecting our own aspirations and ambitions. To do this would be altogether too altruistic!

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