

## Mapping new lecturers' shared and contested identities: a collaborative inquiry

### Context

This paper sets out to illuminate aspects of academic practice, work, careers and cultures in higher education by reporting on a study of academic identity amongst new lecturers. This study is a collaboration between teaching staff and student colleagues on a post-graduate certificate (PgC) in higher education professional practice in an English university. Our innovative research method and democratic research framework enable us to explore new lecturers' shared and contested academic identities in self-revelatory ways, and provide rich resources from which to draw out our findings.

### Nature of the study

The project is centred on a novel research method, 'mapping academic identity', through which individuals conceptualise their academic identity as an island populated with the attributes they bring, or aspire to bring, to their roles. These attributes may be personal characteristics, capabilities or any idiosyncratic aspects that the map-creator selects. The project aims firstly to evaluate the efficacy of this mapping approach as a teaching tool within an academic development syllabus for introducing the topic of academic identity; and secondly as an autoethnographic research method (Denzin, 2006; Ellis and Bochner, 2000). This study builds on insights from a PgC workshop in which each of eight groups of students created composite 'maps' which depicted their joint view of the identity of an academic practitioner. These maps revealed that the students valued the diverse experience they brought to their current roles from their former occupations as doctoral student or disciplinary practitioner. This work was followed up through evaluative questionnaires which explored the extent to which participants felt that their past experience had prepared, or left them unprepared, for their current academic role; and how well they found key aspects of their role to be in balance in their day-to-day academic practice.

Our ethical stance requires that colleagues complete their studies before progressing to the second phase of the project. Here, self-selected members of the PgC cohort provide a commentary as they individually create a map that depicts their self-view as an academic practitioner. Content analysis of these individual commentaries and maps, and of the academic identity maps produced by anonymous groups during the module, leads us to identify both common themes and unusual interpretations of academic identity. This work complements existing studies of socialization and identity development amongst new lecturers (for example, Gurlay, 2011; McAlpine and Åkerlind, 2011; Smith, 2010) but breaks new ground by involving the subjects themselves as co-researchers.

### Methodological approach

In 2004, the artist Grayson Perry RA created an etching he called the *Map of an Englishman* (see Klein, 2009, pp. 184-5). This 'map' of an imaginary island depicts the artist's consciousness and identity. This artwork inspired our principal investigator to research academic identity through the visual metaphor of an island. Having found the approach to be effective in investigating her own academic identity (reference removed), she has opened the method to wider scrutiny through this collaborative inquiry (Heron and Reason, 2001). The use of metaphorical maps is an unusual research method in education, however we note that Macfarlane (2012) has recently adopted a mapping approach to distil a playful vision of educational research theory and theorists.

The present study adopts a reverse pyramid model of involvement whereby each successive stage increases the involvement of participants and decreases the numbers of participants. The first stage involved two teaching staff and a cohort of over fifty new lecturing staff from across the university, and from every faculty. These students represent three different entry routes, that is, lecturers who had undertaken the standard pre-requisite module, lecturers who had been accredited the pre-requisite module because of prior study or experience, and those in other roles but who nevertheless undertake substantial university lecturing and who had undertaken a special introductory module. One strand of the research is to explore the alternative self-perceptions of these three groups of students. The second stage involved a self-selected subset of the original participants who responded anonymously to the evaluative questionnaire. Once the module has finished and marks are confirmed, a sub-group of the former cohort have volunteered to undertake the final project stages by adding their own academic identity maps and commentaries to the project data for collaborative analysis.

A potential criticism of this approach is that those contributing greater levels of involvement will be unrepresentative of the original cohort, and hence their self-view will be similarly unrepresentative. However, the study has been scoped to cater for this. The aim of evaluating the efficacy of the mapping approach as a teaching tool has been addressed by the wider cohort, while its preliminary evaluation as an autoethnographic research method benefits from a limited range of viewpoints.

## Results and implications

The project has already revealed interesting insights into new lecturers shared and contested identities. For example, many of the island maps highlight perceptions of the importance of 'passion' for the discipline or specialism. On the other hand, the maps also reveal unusual interpretations of academic identity, such as a Slightly Blinkered islet which contained Own Experience/Knowledge thereby acknowledging a self-view of partiality. The maps also reveal that the publication aspect of academic practice is already seen as challenging by new lecturers, For example, one has Publish Or Perish out at sea with a life-belt just out of reach, another has Publications And Writing in the water alongside a shark's fin. The challenging nature of the PgC itself was expressed in one map where Learner is the aspect of identity perceived to be out at sea.

These visual metaphors, and the many different attributes of identity that are not simply listed but carefully clustered in the maps, provide unusual insight into the academic identity of new lecturers. This has potential to contribute to the understanding of academic and professional identities more widely, and to our roles within the massified, diversified and globalised higher education sector which our context represents in miniature.

## References

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