

# IN LIMBO? PRACTITIONERS WHO TEACH: PROFESSIONAL IDENTITIES AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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**Research Domain:** Academic practice, work, careers and cultures

## Outline

Theoretical perspectives informing the background to this paper include the socialisation of new academic staff (eg Akerlind 2004; Henkel 2000; Knight, Tait & Yorke 2006) and how they may construct their sense of identity, including within their community of practice (CoP) (eg Clegg 2008, Eraut 2000, Lave & Wenger 1998). Universities have evolved in response to numerous policy initiatives (such as, in the UK, the 1997 [Dearing Report](#), the 2004 [Leitch Report](#), the 2010 [Browne Review](#)), resulting in particular challenges to (re-) define the nature and purpose of Higher Education, changing curricula, the nature of academic work and how these might be experienced by someone becoming an academic (eg Becher & Trowler 2001) in relation to their professional identity. This paper considers these from the perspective of individuals moving between (rather than making a single transition from) professional practice and Higher Education, those who Clegg (2008) has termed **pracademics**.

There are reported benefits in employing professional practitioners in HE. Universities can claim a richer curriculum linked to authentic workplace contexts. Departments can draw on an individual's expertise and industry contacts to enrich curriculum content, attract guest speakers, organise placements and the like. Students are likely to enjoy and benefit from being taught by someone with current professional practice experience. However, this research project focused particularly on the benefits (or not) for practitioner teachers themselves, addressing three key questions:

- (i) What are the opportunities and tensions for practitioner teachers in HE?
- (ii) How do they attempt to make sense of what is expected, either implicitly or explicitly?
- (iii) What factors make this venture more likely to succeed?

The responses lead to a discussion of the implications for the professional development of these staff.

Further perspectives which inform these questions include work in a range of institutions and subject areas. Boyd and Harris (2010) consider the experiences of teachers moving into a role as teacher educators, the nature of their academic induction and how they attempt to navigate the tensions between their academic and professional fields. Shreeve (2011) considers creative arts practitioners' description of their experiences of the relationships between practice and teaching, particularly considering the effect of

*'... the negative experience of relations between practice and teaching..... leaving the individual in limbo between two social practices.'* (2011:79)

Other perspectives include the effects of wider changes in universities' policies and practices over time, including changing expectations of the academic role. Jawitz (2009) notes the tension arising from a shift away from a department's original focus on undergraduate teaching and participation in professional communities towards developing research expertise:

*'...the outputs most valued in the professional CoP, namely physical products produced for commercial purposes, were not regarded as research outputs by the broader academic community.'* (2009:247)

Santoro and Snead (2012) note a tendency for professional practitioners to

*'..experience nostalgia...for... 'the golden age [of universities]''* (2012:389)

What do these tensions mean for professional practitioners engaging in HE work? What do they believe their work entails? How do they deal with changes in their understanding in different disciplinary, institutional and cultural contexts? How might professional development help address some of these challenges?

## **Methodology**

The study on which this paper is based elicited data from practitioners engaged in HE teaching, across a variety of disciplines and with differing amounts of experience. Two groups of potential participants with varying degrees of experience were identified: practitioner teachers in

academic departments, and specialist institutions employing professional practitioners to teach their HE provision, There were two data instruments: an anonymised online questionnaire and voluntary participation in semi-structured interviews. Participants' permission for anonymised quotations from either to be used in published work was sought. The aim was to gather rich data in a confidential setting, given the sensitivities attached for participants talking about their previous and current workplaces.

Although relatively few of the participants in this investigation were fulltime academics, many were working hours in HE normally associated with substantive posts while simultaneously maintaining and developing their professional practice. A significant proportion had been doing so for a number of years, experiencing sector changes in the process. How an individual interpreted and mediated these changes contributed to how they saw themselves as professionals in HE and in practice. Less experienced staff were in the process of trying to reconcile the different roles with varying degrees of success, addressing practical challenges (such as time management) and a sense of having limited institutional agency and voice. The data showed features common to both groups. Both were powerfully motivated by seeing students flourish. Informal participation within both disciplinary and professional communities were significant in discerning expectations and contributing to a sense of belonging. Negative feelings resulted from a lack of recognition or acknowledgement of the value of work in one sphere by the other. This was allied to a strong sense of disorientation and insecurity.

What are the implications for the professional development of staff straddling these communities? It suggests that the key is to offer professional development which helps people position themselves in their multiple roles, affirms the expertise which the professional practitioner brings to bear on their role as an educator, and affords opportunities to identify possible synergies between their practice and their educator roles. This process is assisted by a sense that practitioner expertise is valued in HE and opportunities for the practitioner to consider their career development, for example through participation in both scholarly and practice networks. Finally, those of us with responsibility for academic and professional development need to foster context-sensitive, discipline-specific and cross-institutional environments with opportunities for interdisciplinary engagements. A next step in this research is to identify and interrogate the scale and

effectiveness of interventions which support the integration, development and recognition of practitioners in HE in disciplinary communities.

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