

Serial number 0060 -
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Title Exploring embodied academic identity -
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Exploring embodied academic identity

Abstract

Academia has been described as an unpleasant place, (Bloch, 2012) primarily because emotional and embodied feelings are repressed. Many academics enjoy an embodied practice of some kind outside of work, in addition to those who explicitly engage in one as part of their academic practice. I was funded by the SRHE to explore how academics reconcile an embodied practice with their academic practice and identity, and whether it contributes to their well-being.

The project used discipline crossing creative qualitative methodological approaches (Xenitidou & Gilbert, 2012) that drew on embodied practices to address issues of academic identity. If academia is an example of a disassociated and disembodied culture, how do academics with an embodied practice negotiate their way around it? Does their embodied practice help them make sense of their academic work, and does it make them feel better about it? Do creative research methods help them express their experiences?

Background

Embodiment can be thought of as the fundamental and integral connection between the mind and body, though it is a contested term (Sheets-Johnstone, 2015). There are different definitions of embodiment, and what it means to be embodied. It can describe the way in which our bodies are used to represent ourselves at an individual or cultural level, such as work that is done on the body to change its appearance or function (Crossley, 2006). It can also describe the phenomena of movement as experienced from within (Hartley, 2004; Totton, 2009). I understand embodiment as equating to both a state of being and a process of learning about the self, and so embodied practices are the ways in which an individual might go about a process of bringing conscious self-awareness to and about the body.

Embodied awareness is a fundamental aspect of yoga, other movement forms (Bainbridge-Cohen, 1993; Hartley, 1989; Olsen, 1998), types of martial arts, modern dance and movement awareness (Da'Oud, 1995). Learning an embodied way of being in, looking at and reflecting on the world could fall within Brighouse's (2005) idea of developing 'flourishing lives'. Personal flourishing is "largely created within cultures" (White, 2007:27). Academic identity, and the way in which we as academics

construct our working and out-of-work lives has impact on career, health and well-being (Ennals, Fortune, Williams, & D'Cruz, 2015; Freedman & Stoddard Holmes, 2003; Malcolm & Zukas, 2009). Employers should be promoting the psychological well-being of their employees (NICE, 2009), but need to find out what helps first (Darabi, Macaskill, & Reidy, 2016). Is it possible that an embodied practice could increase personal levels of well-being?

This study fitted my developing profile, in which I have explored embodied reflective practice (~~Leigh & Bailey, 2013~~)(Author & Bailey, 2013), an embodied perspective of judgements on reflective writing- (~~Leigh, 2015~~)(Author, 2015) and becoming an academic developer and HE researcher (forthcoming).

Research questions:

- How do participants make sense of their embodied identity in relation to their academic identity?
- Does an embodied practice impact on academic practice of teaching, service and research? If so, how?
- Does an embodied practice lead to a sense of personal wellbeing within an academic practice?

Methodology

It is vital that methodology is congruent with the focus of research. Due to its rejection of mind-body dualism and the importance of the 'lived body', phenomenology (Bain, 1995) was particularly relevant, as the description of experience is its fundamental concern (Sheets-Johnstone, 2010). Phenomenological, (Leder, 1990; Merleau-Ponty, 2002) participatory, (Smith, 2008) and an adapted mosaic approach (Clark & Moss, 2001) were used to gather a variety of data as the participants explored the research questions through dialogue, movement, mark-making, drawing, and the use of film or photographic images. I took a reflexive and participatory ethnographic role (Pink, 2009) throughout, in which my voice was heard alongside that of the other participants. This allowed the co-construction of meaning and ensured that all participant voices were heard as we made sense of the data, building up a mosaic of evidence that included visual and textual data.

I met with 11 academics who self-identified as having an embodied practice, and who represented a range of seniority levels and disciplinary areas from PhD students to Professors and dance, anthropology, sociology and STEM. These meetings were not traditional interviews, in that although the participants were invited to talk, they were also invited to move, to draw, to mark make, and on

one occasion to make music. One participant described the meeting as more of a 'play date' than an interview, and this captures the playful nature of the interactions. The meetings were very much a dialogue, with myself and each participant working to make sense of the ideas discussed. The participants have included 4 men, and 7 women. Each play date has been filmed and digitally recorded, and transcribed, and the data includes the transcriptions, mark-making and art work, my reflective journal and the video footage.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith, 2011) was used to analyse the data. A proportion of the data gathered were visual, and were analysed as such (Rose, 2007). Film footage was edited and will form part of the presentation. Participants were invited to be part of a participatory approach to analysis, which contributes to the self-formation of ideas through authentic dialogue (Gadamer, 2004).

Findings

Preliminary data are very interesting, with a range of self-identified embodied practices including yoga, meditation, martial arts, and movement forms including Alexander Technique. The academics reflected on the meanings they attributed to their embodied practices, how these practices shaped their identity, how they converged and diverged with their academic identity, and how they reconciled any tensions between them. The use of the creative research methods proved helpful to allow individuals to make sense of their experiences, and the differences in how they perceived things and how they thought they perceived things. There were conversations about the ways in which embodied practices have more or less impact on identity due to contributing factors such as illness or injury, and how embodied practices can contribute to well-being and identity formation.

There have been three main themes. The first considers the language around and identification of and with embodied (or somatic) practices and academic identity. Some of the academics I spoke to identified more strongly with their embodied practice or academic work. Many saw connections between the different aspects of their identity, and recognised how one fed into the other. The second theme is the tension between the pressures of producing academic work and existing within the academy and how academics reconcile that with their embodied practice, and how these fit within the idea of 'well-being'. The third theme is methodological, for example the ways in which academics creatively engaged (or not) with the research methods, whether there were correlations between relationship to embodied practice and willingness to experiment with the creative methods on offer, and the kinds of data and insights that using creative methods allowed.

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