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Performing Arts to Academia - Creativity to Conformity?

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Abstract: PERFORMING ARTS TO ACADEMIA – CREATIVITY TO CONFORMITY?

For delivery of practice based degrees in performing arts, Universities often seek to employ lecturers with a strong professional profile which is considered to add value to the student experience. The performing arts employment context is one which is volatile and unstable, but one where individuals feel their creativity is in demand. In this study, participants' gave their rationale for a move to academia as a desire to create stability and security, but they find themselves in a neo-liberal work environment where they have to navigate insecurity and increasing demands to conform and perform in a culture of audit and accountability. This study focuses on the transition between these two work environments and explores the ways performing arts academics attempt to navigate the academic environment, and the impact this has on their identity.

Paper: PERFORMING ARTS TO ACADEMIA – CREATIVITY TO CONFORMITY?

Context

For delivery of practice based degrees in performing arts, Universities often seek to employ lecturers with a strong professional profile which is considered to add value to the student experience. Performing arts employment is volatile and unstable (Caves 2000; Neilson and Rossiter, 2005), but one where individuals feel their creativity is in demand. The increased use of short term or freelance contracts within the performing arts sector means that issues of insecurity and 'precarity' increasingly exists amongst creative workers (Davis and Scase 2000; Neilson and Rossiter, 2005). This can mean a discontinuity of activity for those in the sector due to time-limited projects, requiring individuals to build a strong reputation as the basis for employment and develop strong personal networks (Benhamou 2003; Caves, 2000). In performing arts, reputation is based on individual's creative skill, whether as a performer interpreting director's wishes, or as a director, composer,

creator. It is also based on how individuals creatively navigate the networked work environment and ensure they are constantly seen by the right people.

This unstable work prompts some practitioners to seek employment in what they perceive as a more stable environment. Practice-based performing arts degrees have expanded, part of the growth in newer university subjects seeking professionally experienced staff (Fulton, 1996; Altbach, 2000), therefore providing more career opportunities for performing arts specialists. However, academia is increasingly subjected to managerialism in a variety of audit guises. Those transitioning from performing arts find themselves in an increasingly neo-liberal work environment where they have to navigate managerial demands to conform and perform in a culture of audit and accountability. This cultural shift can leave individuals feeling out of place, insecure in their role and anxious about perceived failure to meet the ever-increasing multiplicity of demands (Clarke, Knights and Jarvis, 2012; Knights and Clarke, 2014; Fanghanel, 2014).

Research Project

This study is part of a DBA, whose objectives are to:

- explore the (re)development of identities of staff who have transitioned from performing arts careers to academic roles in higher education
- examine the key factors that impact on their process of identity transformation
- develop recommendations for supporting academics transitioning from performing arts careers

These objectives are underpinned by a number of research questions, including these which are the focus of this paper:

1. How do professional identities of staff, who have transitioned from performing arts careers into higher education, adapt and change?
2. What are the potential structural mechanisms that act as key enablers and constraints in identity transition?
3. How strong is the identification with both performing arts and academia, and how does this impact on professional identity in their new role?

This study explores transitions in identity from a social constructionist perspective and how different environments impact on identity. It is based on in-depth interviews with 12 performing arts academics and three University senior managers, across eight modern UK universities. Interviews were conducted with a narrative approach to elicit in-depth responses. This paper focuses on a small section of the results which emerged.

Key Findings

In this study, participants viewed performing arts as a vocation rather than a career; their confidence in their own creative skills was shown through personal concepts of success and failure in their performing arts careers. Because of the nature of creative industries' work, participants' self-perceptions of their creative identity are dynamic (Hagstrom, 2005), constantly changing in relation to the feedback received for every role or job, but also shifting in relation to the perceived success of others in their immediate social network. Additionally, participants themselves identified the clear importance of the need to be creative in their approach to finding work as well as in their direct performance work.

By contrast, the majority of participants felt their professional creative profile and approach to work was largely ignored within the academy; as academics, there was a strong sense of being an outsider. This came through both in participants who actively engaged in practice-based research, and in those who currently only engaged in teaching and administration. A lack of formal socialization on entering the role highlighted gaps in participants' organisational and sector knowledge and created challenges for them in shifting into new organisational structures. Clegg (2008:340) suggests that 'academic identities (are) being actively shaped in response to changes in university structures and external environments'; Clarke and Knights (2015) highlight the challenges of finding an academic identity in changing environments with shifting priorities. There was a clear sense in the narratives of feeling under institutional pressure to work to targets, complete significant amounts of administration and, for some, complete qualifications and start on a research journey, which has impacted on participants' experiences in the transition process. The process of achieving qualifications such as a PgCert in Learning and Teaching was identified as strengthening participants' identification as a lecturer and validating their creative teaching and learning approaches.

As the external environment changes and institutions increasingly demand that academic staff be engaged in research and scholarship, several participants now find they are in a role that is not as expected and in response are questioning their identity, leading to a sense of 'othering' of their academic identity. In all participants, whether research active or not, their creative performing arts identity has greater salience than their academic identity. In this context, there is a belief that institutions do not value their creative experiences, so the reliance on the performing arts identity adds to their perceived self-value by creating the bridge with their earlier professional experience.

The study identified clear tensions between the adaptive creative identity that participants had as a performing arts professional and the feelings that, firstly, their creative experience is not valued in academia and secondly, that they feel pressured to conform to an idealised image of being an academic. The research suggests that the sector, and individual institutions, still need to reinterpret their ascribed identity of what an academic is to better incorporate the range of individuals entering the profession.

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