

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

0361

Academic Identities and Wicked Problems: Beyond Discipline-focused Identities?

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Abstract:

The extensive changes taking place in higher education have fuelled a growing literature on the shifting identities of academics as they negotiate related transitions and tensions (Barrow, Grant and Xu, 2021; Hodgson and Watts, 2021). There has also been considerable interest in education that prepares students for working with wicked problems – or global challenges. It is therefore important to understand and enable academics who are willing to take on the challenges of teaching complex interdisciplinary topics in institutions that may not be ideally set up to support them. This paper therefore explores the identities of 35 academics who were interviewed about their teaching about wicked problems. These participants often narrated identities focused around a particular wicked problem, rather than on their discipline. This seemed to bring valuable coherence to their working lives. Implications include the importance of creating institutional structures and practices that enable academics with these foci to flourish.

Paper: The extensive and rapid changes taking place in the social and political contexts, funding, and practices of higher education (Barrow, Grant and Xu, 2021; Hodgson and Watts, 2021) have fuelled a growing literature on the shifting identities of academics as they negotiate related transitions and tensions. Academic identities are understood here as dynamic and multifaceted narratives that are situated in social, cultural and historic processes (Curwood 2014; Sfard and Prusak 2005; Watson 2006). These identities are significant stories their about individuals and their identification with diverse communities, including their academic disciplines (Beauchamp and Thomas 2009; Di Napoli and Barnett 2008; Sfard and Prusak 2005; Taylor 2008; Watson 2006). Building on this literature, there is also a developing body of research into how academic identities relate to teaching in higher education, particularly in contexts where teaching focused identities are challenged by competing priorities such as a strong emphasis on research metrics (Harness and Boyd, 2021; McCune, 2019). Academic identity work can create a coherent sense of self that is key to choice and motivation for academic life, including teaching (Archer 2000; Taylor 2008).

Over a similar time span, there has been growing interest in education that prepares students for working with wicked problems – or global challenges – in their future lives (Anderson & McCune,

2013; Barnett, 2007; Cantor, DeLauer, Martin and Rogan, 2015). Dealing effectively with wicked problems typically involves dynamic and interdisciplinary problem solving involving multiple stakeholders. These processes can result unpredictable and sometimes problematic outcomes (Barrett, 2012; Cantor, et al., 2015; Wicked problems are characterised by high levels of value divergence, complexity and uncertainty (Rittel and Weber, 1973; Veltman, Van Keulen and Voogt, 2019). Wicked problems include, amongst others: conflict; social inequality; and the climate emergency. They therefore closely resemble the supercomplex problems identified by Barnett (2007) as crucial considerations for higher education.

In our increasingly performative sector, extrinsic metrics often dominate making it harder to maintain intrinsic engagement with transformative teaching of challenging topics. (Ball 2003; Gunn 2018; Leibowitz et al. 2012). These metrics can assert considerable influence on academic identities (Lasky 2005; Wertsch 1991). This being the case, presenting as the kind of academic who strongly values transformative learning in higher education can lead to significant tensions (Loads and Collins 2016) particularly in research-intensive universities (Skelton 2013). Therefore it is important to understand and enable academics who are willing to take on the challenges of teaching complex interdisciplinary topics like wicked problems, despite these pressures. These teachers are necessary for higher education to be successful in offering the meaningful educational experiences that may prepare students to be ethical citizens in relation to global challenges.

On this basis, this paper explores the identities of academics who teach about wicked problems in higher education. The paper is based on 35 semi-structured interviews with academic staff across a large research-intensive university. These interviews were recorded and transcribed in full. Twenty of our participants focused their teaching on wicked problem and we had a comparison group of fifteen teachers whose teaching did not address wicked problems. We are currently developing a thematic analysis of these data based on close repeated reading of the transcripts and constant comparison between our wicked problems group and the comparison group. Our initial findings suggest that academics teaching about wicked problems may have academic identities that centre on a particular wicked problem, rather than on their disciplinary affiliation, as is more common in higher education. In fact, when we asked about affiliation with a particular subject area, some participants struggled to answer or suggested they understood themselves to be interdisciplinary academics. This focus on wicked problems seemed to help bring coherence to these participants' teaching, research and wider activism. This in turn seems to allow rich perspectives on student learning, deep commitment to education and openness to ongoing development as a teacher.

Implications for policy makers in higher education include the importance of creating institutional structures and practices that enable academics tackling wicked problems to flourish in their roles. At present, institutional policies and structures can mitigate against interdisciplinary work, collaborating with communities outside higher education, and deep engagement with transformative teaching. Changes that enable rather than constrain innovative practice in relation to wicked problems are sorely needed.

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