

## **(Re)setting the boundaries? A narrative enquiry into being a university teacher and the role of pedagogy in a post-truth society**

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### **Research Domains**

Learning, teaching and assessment (LTA)

### **Abstract**

This paper explores how academics understand their role as a teacher and the purpose of pedagogy in UK higher education in the midst of a disruptive moment. The neoliberal rhetoric on ‘what works’ continues to prioritise a reductive model of good teaching, placing rigid boundaries around our HE classrooms. At the same time, post-truthism, while pushing against the gatekeeping of knowledge, risks creating a boundary-less classroom entirely, undermining what and how academics teach. Our qualitative research seeks to take a step back. Using narrative enquiry, we ask academics at the University of Cambridge to tell their stories on being a university teacher. Drawing on emerging findings, we shall reflect on the pedagogical principles that they are using to navigate the complexities of higher learning and to address and resist the trends seeking certainty or controllability over education, and what this could mean for resetting the boundaries with our students.

### **Full paper**

This paper explores how academic staff understand their role as a ‘teacher’ and the purpose of pedagogy in UK higher education in the midst of a disruptive moment. In principle, such discourses have pushed us from within the academe to challenge the hierarchical power and privileges entrenched within our everyday environments, which, for too long, have normalised the university as being the only producers of legitimate truth and knowledge. This has also urged us, as an increasingly diversifying body, to question if not resist its role in the gatekeeping of this knowledge. In doing so, we are questioning the rigid boundaries that have been placed traditionally around the higher education classroom, and our own roles with this — whereby the academic has been typically viewed as the unquestionable expert as ‘all-knowing’ whose role is to transmit knowledge to the student through didactic teaching.

However, in practice, these discourses are increasingly caught within the rise of post-truthism, creating a boundary-less classroom entirely and with this, undermining what and how academics teach (Horden 2019; Morris 2024). When accompanied by the neoliberal rhetoric, producing linear, reductive thinking about higher learning, the academic’s role becomes reduced even more so to merely ‘all-facilitating’

(Oleksiyenko and Jackson 2020). Anything not conforming to this ideal — including how HE teachers engage with critical thinking to test those claims to truth and knowledge— is quite paradoxically disregarded. Exacerbating this is the favoured approach towards using positivistic methods, designed to look for an oversimplified, causal relationship between teaching practice and student outcomes and generalises what is good teaching and what is not. At its worse, this double-truth of post-truthism and neoliberalism is creating a constant state of disorientation for both the academic and the student (Davids 2021).

Teacher development programmes play a seminal role in helping academics to engage with critical, reflexive, and inclusive pedagogies to help their students navigate this complex terrain. However, while we have an abundance of theoretical frameworks to guide us in what these pedagogies could look like, rarely are these grounded in empirical research. Of the empirical research that explores academics who are engaging in such pedagogies, they are recruited based on a pre-determined criteria as defined by the HE researcher (Harrison and Lockett, 2019; Chinn et al, 2021; Stentiford and Koutsouris 2021). Curiously, there is little research that takes a step back — to explore firstly how academic staff understand their role as a ‘teacher’ and how they view their role within the wider purpose of higher education. Such research would further help us to explore the types of pedagogies that academics, as teachers, are actually ascribing to in order to navigate the complexities of higher learning, and to address or resist with their students the trends seeking certainty or controllability over education.

This research is the first of its kind in our literature-base. It is asking twenty academics with teaching responsibilities from the University of Cambridge to tell their stories on becoming and being a university teacher and their everyday experiences in the higher education classroom. They were recruited from having recently completed a nine-month accredited programme at the Cambridge Centre for Teaching and Learning that led to accreditation of Fellowship from the AdvanceHE. To recognise the subjective nature of truth, we are purposefully analysing these academics’ stories through narrative enquiry: an unstructured qualitative method that seeks to capture what insights arise from prioritising stories over questions of causality and gives space for self-reflection. This paper will present the emerging findings of what can be learned so far. We hope to provide opportunity for the audience to reflect on the types of pedagogical principles, based on actual teaching experiences, to support our professional development in becoming and being critical, reflexive and inclusive teachers. A priority being to help ground us while navigating this disruptive and disoriented moment and what this might mean in resetting the boundaries with our students in our teaching and learning environments.

## References

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