

Perpetual Identity Constructing (0017)

Clancy Alison ¹, ¹*UCD, Dublin, Ireland*

In the last ten years unprecedented changes have occurred in all aspects of higher education including its function, its overall structures, and financing (Biggs, 2003). Biggs suggests that academics who are now working in higher level institutions originate from one of two groups: the older, more mature academics who no longer recognise the higher level institution in which they work and the younger academics on short term contracts who lack employment security and therefore would not consider attempting anything that may be out of kilter with the organisation's overall strategy. In contemporary society, the new university exists within a context of supercomplexity (Barnett, 2000a). The impact of the extraordinary changes in the nature of higher education and the university is that lecturers are faced with an unprecedented amount of adjustment due to increased class sizes, greater student diversity (McNay, 2005), more short term contracts and an ever-increasing research agenda (Boud, 1999). Consequently, academics have experienced so much difficulty in adapting to this rapid change that they no longer are sure of what is expected of them (Harris, 2005; Biggs, 2003; Trowler, 2001; Henkel, 2000). The established research agenda within the vast majority of higher level institutions has left many academics frustrated in regard to their positions and their roles. This is further heightened by organisational structures that fail to foster teaching and learning.

Constructing academic identity requires a reshuffling of priorities within the institution's organisational structures and a personal commitment from each academic. More is involved than simply deciding to change. However, it is increasingly difficult for academics to find space or time to incite change from occurring as their energy has become depleted due to the high level of speed at which higher education is operating. Within higher education, as within all spheres of modern life, the nature of clock time has accelerated and become more intense (Eriksen, 2001; Hassan, 2003). Thus, the ability to create space or time is not easy and the idea of slowing down their pace of work may seem unrealistic to most academics. Therefore, the future for academics is becoming less predictable, more uncertain, and long term planning is rarely achieved due to frantic focusing on the here and now.

RESEARH DESIGN

The goal of this research was to understand the construction of academic identity and to generate to a logical, systematic, explanatory theory of academic identity construction within higher education. Participants were recruited from a cohort of academics from a higher education institution within the Republic of Ireland. A total of 27 in-depth, un-structured interviews were conducted. Grounded theory was selected because, unlike other research methodologies, it provides a way of discovering theoretically complete explanations about particular phenomena (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978; 1992; 2001; 2002; 2003a; 2005). Grounded theory is useful because there are many unanswered questions regarding the construction of academic identity in higher education and there appears to be no existing grounded theories that explain this phenomenon. Below the context of this study is elucidated.

THE MAIN CONCERN

The main concern for academics is development time. The lack of ability to find time for identity formation that is necessary in a new role perpetuates problems associated with identity construction. Indeed, academics are losing ground and are being manipulated to best suit the organisation and the discipline to which they belong. They are unable to decide what becoming an academic and working in the realm of higher education signifies to them. Consequentially, academics are often steered down a particular road that is not of their choosing. Thus the ability to find a voice, to stand out against current organisational and disciplinary structures is not easy to achieve. Academics resolve this concern through perpetually constructing their academic identities.

PERPETUALLY CONSTRUCTING

Perpetually Constructing is the process that academics go through to construct their academic identities. it is a cyclical process that is never quite completed as the need to constantly re-develop and re-learn is ever present. Even when a new identity is reconstructed, individuals will still bear witness too many wrong turnings and errors in judgment as they continue to develop and grow into academics they know they can potentially become. Thus the stages of deconstructing and reconstructing identity are continuously present in the lifetime of the academic.

This three-staged process of perpetual construction is a basic social process (Glaser, 1978). In this process, academics construct their academic identities, by first managing their predisposed academic identities, then deconstructing them and finally reconstructing them. In this process, academics manage their predisposed identities through the sub-processes of determining and conforming. Academic identity is deconstructed through surviving, relinquishing and exposing. Academic identity is reconstructed through engaging and spacing.

CONTRIBUTIONS FROM THIS STUDY

This grounded theory identifies an important social process that has not been previously acknowledged for academics within higher education. This theory argues that possibility portals create space and time and are thus essential constructs within higher

level institutions. Academics need **to** be encouraged to find sufficient space and create enough time, allowing them to become self-deliberative and self-critical, with every possibility to reinvent themselves. There is a need for each higher level institution to reshape the understanding of 'academic identity' and to support each academic in defining his or her own teaching and research agendas.

CONCLUSION

Within the context of this grounded theory study, the stages of perpetual identity constructing, includes all professional areas that are pertinent to the constant redevelopment of the academic. Subsequently, possibility portals are simply a vehicle for creating space and time and thus can exist in numerous disparate forms. Hence there are several portals that need to be identified within higher education that facilitate this objective. Finally, this grounded theory is a powerful new theory that has fit, work, and reliability and is easily modifiable. It transcends, organises, and synthesizes the extant literature on academic identity construction, and explains stages of a newly identified basic social process, which may have relevance to many other substantive areas.