

# Fragmented academic identity: lessons from defining academic practice (0064)

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In comparison with accounts aiming to explain how we may view academic practice as an integrated and coherent whole from a theoretical perspective (e.g. McAlpine and Hopwood, 2006; CETL, 2007), I contribute to accounting for how and why the experience of academic practice, and of developing as an early career academic (ECA), towards forming an academic identity, is, by contrast, significantly fragmentary. This problematic phenomenon, from the perspectives both of the ECA wondering what they are meant to do and of the academic developer (whether as the general university staff role or as the disciplinary mentor) facilitating their development, demands analysis and is the rationale for this paper, informed by two research projects (CETL1, 2007; CETL2, 2010).

It would be difficult to approach the question concerning the proper nature of the work to be prepared for without drawing from the post-Newman debate on the idea of the university (or of higher education) but the focus is not identical. If an aim of higher education is to celebrate and ensure the pursuit of 'Knowledge its own end' (Newman, 1976, Discourse V, pp.94-112) then it would be hard to achieve that where such pursuit (once we explicate its meaning) was a main job role of no individual workers at all. That said, the workforce overall undertakes a variety of job roles and so makes its contribution in different ways to serve any established aims, whether of the sector or of the particular employing institution. Tapper and Salter (1992, p.33) may be correct that the traditional liberal underpinning of the university has, at least in the UK context since the 1980s, yet given way to the new managerialism's utilitarian vision of service to the economy, in which case teaching and research would both be serving this end. But Tapper (2009) is certainly incorrect to suggest that taking on management roles in your career means that your practice ceases to be academic in nature.

Understanding the aims of higher education, whatever they are or should be, if they are more than chimerical anyway (c.f. Barnett, 1988), and that teaching or research must serve them, does not in itself assist novice ECAs in getting off first base in how they should go about their roles. Even though in this paper I am adopting a philosophical perspective, in employing conceptual analysis to the question, albeit at risk of opprobrium from some quarters (e.g. Aviram, 1992, pp.188-189), my approach is educationist rather than conducted primarily through social and political philosophy. In other words, my focus, in considering the nature of academic practice, is on the individual level and from the point of view of the academic developer, how we practise academic work rather than generally understanding higher education (the reverse emphasis to Barnett 1990, p.ix), what workers' roles should be into which we may assist them to develop, and from the

point of view of the ECA, with regard to how they learn how and what to do in their work.

The fragmentary experience for ECAs is partly a function of institutional convenience, packaging roles and development provision as a series of discrete entities. This notwithstanding, I propose that the ground for the fragmentary experience goes deeper, down to our understanding of academic practice as a concept. Conceptual analysis finds traditional essentialism and the Wittgensteinian family resemblance approach to definition, and then W.B. Gallie's default alternative of essential contestability, inadequate similarly, because question-begging, for the concepts of academic practice and of art, despite these approaches offering foundation in principle for coherence of the concepts based upon salient properties. Offering potentially more enlightenment about academic practice are a pair of alternative theories borrowed from philosophy of art, George Dickie's institutional theory, and Timothy Binkley's 'anti-definition' theory. They both emphasise innovativeness in practice. Binkley's theory, more successfully than Dickie's, can capture the extra-institutional action of the creation of artworks, resonating closely with Paul Feyerabend's epistemological anarchism concerning science, and likewise less explanatory of academic practice. The institutional ground of academic work is precisely what makes Dickie's theory of definition more fruitful in accounting for academic practice.

A criticism may be offered against the institutional theory that academic practice in our particular HEI would then be whatever our HEI officially tells us that we should do, what brand we must embody. It does follow that an HEI could attempt to pursue a policy that many practitioners see as diverging too far from what they would find acceptable under their label for academic aims and there would be no salient necessary and sufficient conditions under a definition to stop them (even if such a project were possible, which some doubt: Wæraas and Solbakk, 2009, p.459). Following Dickie, however, accepting the institutional theory does not equate to endorsing that HEI managements have the highest prerogative to dictate the direction of work. Legitimate members of the HEI, the rank and file, even acting individually, have the appropriate authority, as members of the academic institution more broadly (i.e. the very idea of the university as itself an institution), competently to direct their own work and, for instance, engage critically with the tenets of neo-liberalism and performativity (Smith, 2003, p.320), even when a neo-liberal framework might as it happens be the hand that feeds them through materially underpinning society and its institutions.

Academic developers may usefully assist ECAs in developing their practice concentrating on specific roles, such as teaching, research and service, and even how to forge links between them, as long as these areas are taken generally and relatively acontextually. Because of the nature of the concept, however, developers cannot without being disingenuous provide for ECAs a unitary and coherent impression of

academic practice as a whole job supporting a unitary identity and so the particular contextually specific experience for ECAs of developing, and for more established academic workers their identity, will always be fragmentary.

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