

## **Exploring lecturer conceptions of university teacher identity: Who should I be? (0097)**

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For many university teachers, the process of forging a teaching identity is challenging, if not fraught, because the external 'messages' they receive concerning who they should be are unclear, changing or inconsistent. These messages may also conflict with a conception of who they should be that is deeply rooted in their prior and on-going personal life experiences. Seeking an understanding of how teachers perceive, experience and respond to such a complex array of external and internal messages is an important agenda when viewed from both scholarship and practice perspectives. How do teachers 'figure out' who to be? What do they turn their attention to, mull over, sort out, clarify, contemplate, weigh-up, judge and make their minds up about? And, how might teachers differ in the way they tackle this task?

These questions have been addressed in three overlapping research projects. One project that focused on relationships between academic development, teacher development and decision-making and student learning, provided compelling insights into the multiplicity of influences on one teacher's thoughts about teaching and the difficulty of differentiating and weighting the impact of particular factors given the complexity of interactions between influences and their cumulative influence over time. (Haigh & Naidoo, 2007). This research prompted a reconsideration of the methodology and methods that would be appropriate for investigating such complex phenomena. A second project focused on the place of scholarship in teachers' conceptualization of their identity and roles (Haigh, Gossman & Jiao, 2010). Again, the findings made it apparent that a wide range of pre-conditions and pull, drag or push factors determined whether teachers perceived themselves as scholars of teaching. Finally, in a doctoral investigation Jiao (2010) investigated perceptions, experiences and responses of a sample of 22 university teachers in a New Zealand university in relation to influences on their teaching thoughts and practices. While building on previous research on the sources and nature of influences (e.g. Fanghanel, 2004, 2007), the researcher gave much more attention to teachers' inner experience of and response to these influences, in particular when they present dissonant messages about being a teacher. For each participant, personal and contextual/structural influences played out in their mind in both complex and idiosyncratic ways and had transitory or enduring impacts on their views about teaching. The data also highlighted the significance of teachers' perception of the relationship between personal agency and structural power as an important mediator of their deliberations on and response to influences.

The latter project has provided particularly rewarding glimpses into the *life of the mind* of university teachers as they contemplate and make decisions about who they will be – as a teacher. In part this has occurred because the researcher used Archer's interrelated notions of

'reflexive deliberation' and 'internal conversation' as one lens for analyzing teachers' accounts of their deliberations on their teacher identity (Archer, 2003). Archers' differentiation of four modes of reflexive deliberation (autonomous, communicative, meta and fractured) are drawn on when we present some illustrative data from this project.

As an adjunct to these three projects, we have identified perspectives on the identity of a university teacher that are implicit or explicit in the discourse of the New Zealand Government and the discourse of one New Zealand university. Government documents that we have analyzed include the New Zealand Education Amendment Act (1990), the New Zealand Tertiary Education Strategy 2010 – 2015, National Tertiary Teaching Excellence Award criteria, the statement on Cycle 4 academic audits of the New Zealand Universities Academic Audit Unit 2008 – 2012, the Performance-Based Research Fund and the Strategic Plan of Ako Aotearoa, the National Centre for Tertiary Teaching Excellence 2010 – 2013. Documents from the university that have been similarly analyzed and critiqued include the Strategic Plan, the Investment Plan, the Learning and Teaching Framework and Plan, staff development policy and academic promotion policy. One conclusion from this review is that the external messages from these sources are variable in comprehensiveness, detail and consistency. Jiao's research also indicate that their presence in the mind of university teachers when they are engaged in reflexive deliberations is similarly varied (Jiao, 2010).

The findings from these projects offer helpful insights for other teachers, academic staff developers, and academic leaders in universities. When teachers have the opportunity to read or listen to colleagues' accounts of their *within-the-mind* teaching life, they may become aware of contrastive identities that teachers choose to assume as well as ways in which identity may be deliberated and decided on. This stance finds support in parallel research by Archer (2008), Clegg (2008), Hocking, et.al. (2009) and Kahn (2009). Academic developers might similarly draw on such case studies to provide new teachers with authentic representations of the everyday 'lived reality' of teaching and to plan an agenda for their academic development work that takes into account the multiplicity of influences on their colleagues thoughts about teaching and possible constraints on their own influence. For academic leaders, lack of insight into those realities is likely to mean that their attempts to influence teaching through the manipulation of structural and contextual factors will have less impact than anticipated. Conversely, teachers may benefit from similar insights into the lives of colleagues who take on management and leadership roles. Such mutual awareness and understanding suggests that collegiality remains a desirable foundation for an academic community.

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