

“So didn't you want an academic career?” Constructing the identity of the Employability Fellow” (0134)

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Introduction

In 2009 the University of Central Lancashire employed five permanent members of staff as Fellows or Senior Fellows in Employability and Enterprise, as part of the implementation of the University-wide Student Employability and Enterprise Strategy. Although employed as academic members of staff, the Fellows have been met with confusion as regards their actual role, remit and indeed identity. Coming from vastly different backgrounds themselves, acting as teachers and researchers without an academic school in which to locate themselves, the identity ascribed to the Employability Fellow by others is one of fragmentation and dislocation; a fact that, this paper argues, speaks to the wider question of where to locate employability and enterprise services within Higher Education as a whole..

This paper is informed by narratives of identity construction. Following qualitative interviews with the five Employability Fellows, narrative theory is used to interrogate their individual processes of identity formation. The analysis also draws on postfeminist theories of the performativity of identity (Butler, Irigaray) to examine the ‘constructedness’ of the identities produced. We will examine which aspects of personal history and experience they choose to foreground in their performance of identity to different audiences, and how these choices relate to their overall position within the University. Extrapolating from this analysis of personal academic identity, we will move on to examine the meta-narratives of identity encoded within the relationship between employability and enterprise provision and “traditional” academic subject teaching and research within Higher Education at large, in an effort to re-envision the changing landscape of academic identity for the twenty-first century.

Theoretical Perspective

Judith Butler reads ‘the body’ as ‘a passive medium that is signified by an inscription from a cultural source figured as ‘external’ to that body’ (164). Identity as we understand it exists via ‘acts, gestures enactments [which], generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means’ (173). In other words, the human body exists as a blank canvas onto which we project, through performance, a version of ourselves that we wish to present to the world. Although Butler’s work is concerned primarily with the performance of gendered identity, it resonates with the constructed professional/academic identity of the Employability Fellow, for two reasons: first, purely by coincidence, all of the Employability Fellows at UCLan are women, and therefore by Butler’s reasoning are engaged in acts of performativity on a daily basis. Second, it seems that through the lack of clarity surrounding both these roles and employability in general, the employability academic finds him/herself being constantly objectified by others according to their own perceptions: constantly performing a version of academic identity for the benefit of others. Furthermore, each Employability Fellow has arrived at this point in her career through vastly different routes and experiences. This paper will also consider how each narrative of previous experience contributes to the performance of identity. Ute Berns reads performativity as a ‘travelling concept’ within the field of narratology; that is, as a concept that works on different levels within the broader theoretical field. For Berns, performativity resonates not only with narratives that attempt to evoke sensation or transform perception, in the form of written, visual or acoustic narratives, but also narratives that are corporeally enacted: ‘Performativity is also at stake when narrative discourse as a whole is treated as a speech act, or when the attention shifts to the pragmatic relations within which the narrative itself turns into an act’ (103). The Employability

Fellows are daily engaged in narrative speech acts in which they attempt to explain, often to justify their existence by detailing their personal, professional and academic experience; these speech acts develop into a performative 'acting out' of who they are and what they do.

With these twin concepts in mind, this paper seeks to explore in depth precisely how the Employability Fellows construct and perform their identities, and to uncover the way that these diverse narratives feed into the shared professional identity categorised by the empty shell of 'Fellow in Employability and Enterprise'. The Fellows were invited to narrate their identities using structured questions that were designed to elicit the difference between their own personal narratives of identity and the performed meta-identity of the Employability Fellow. It was also hoped that by deconstructing the relationship between the two the ensuing discussion may enable us to re-envisage the positioning of employability within the HE sector as a whole.

Constructing the Employability Fellow

The fellows were asked for their responses to the following four questions:

- What drew you to the role of Employability Fellow?
- How did you come to be in the position you are in today?
- How do you explain your role to other members of staff (especially other academics)?
- How do you feel employability is perceived a) in this University and b) within the HE sector as a whole?

The first question was designed to gain an overview of any preconceptions that the Fellows may have brought to their roles; also to provide an initial building block in developing the identity narratives of each. Questions 2 and 3 provide data that can be located within a narratological framework on the level of *histoire* (Question 2 – the story that is presented) and *narration* (Question 3 – the narrator's act of mediation). As Bern explains, 'In the first case the spectator perceived the unfolding of a story. In the second case she perceives an act of narration taking place' (96). Of course, both narratives derived from these questions are performative (distinguished by Bern as 'Performativity 1.1' and 'Performativity 1.2') and are mediated by different factors – this analysis seeks to identify the difference between the two narratives, and consider what impact is made by the mitigating factor that is located within this interpretation as the insubstantiality of employability. Finally, Question 4 broadens the debate to consider the implications of this uncertainty for the future development of Employability within HE as a whole.

References

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