

## Outline:

Considering “what is higher education for” opens a vast selection of territories to choose from and within this embodiment exists the part-time faculty who Becher and Trowler (2001:18) identified as central to the operation over a decade ago and who continue to be an important part of the community that make up higher education. Their nature and transition has not been investigated in the depth that has occurred for the full-time faculty. In particular, the journey professional practitioners make to become a University teacher or the drivers of these ambitions, is only starting to emerge through research.

Boden, *et al* (2005:26-27) point out three pathways into higher education leading from either the traditional route, the teaching route or the professional route. This study focused on those newcomers who have a strong professional background and who enter teaching, on a part-time basis, from the professional route bringing know-how with them. They are engaged by institutions often because of this applied knowledge and expertise joining the community usually to teach (or lead) vocational courses. Frequently, as Boden, *et al* (2005:26-27) suggest, these people have reached a place “where they want a change of direction or stimulus”. The study showed that teaching their subject in higher education was often a second or blended career choice. Having succeeded and achieved their ambitions in the external world they possessed the desire to give something back to others, the students.

The presentation introduces a substantive-level theory that has emerged from ongoing investigations into the perspectives of professional practitioners who have made the transition to become a University lecturer, and particularly those engaged on a part-time basis. These newcomers arrive having a perception of “what higher education is for” from an external perspective and these opinions can be formed from them being a student on the receiving end of University teaching. They have aspirations. Ambitions that include enriching the student learning experience by sharing the know-how gained from applying theory in the practice of their profession. Findings reveal that new teachers start out highly motivated and confident to teach their subject. Sharing the lessons they have learned by teaching others is a motivator and explains “what they are for” within higher education.

Initially, the empirical research set out to explore the experiences, feelings and hindsight of new part-time lecturers who had undergone the transition process to become a University lecturer. This qualitative study applied the Grounded Theory Approach collecting rich data from the knowledge-bearers during interviews. At the point of theoretical saturation, deconstruction and reassembly processes aided the discovery of a substantive-level theory, a concept that has been termed as the theory of Conscious Assumption, Wilson (2009). The collective voice of professional practitioners had revealed various transitional themes associated with the transformational journey they had made and their stories continually pointed back to the existence of a central phenomena. A situation that caused obstacles to a

smooth transition from one world to the other and one that pivoted around the unknown.

Unearthing this concept, Fig 1 below, enables an illustration to show the situation (conscious assumption) situated at the heart of problem and existing in the overlap at the point these two worlds fuse together into one community.

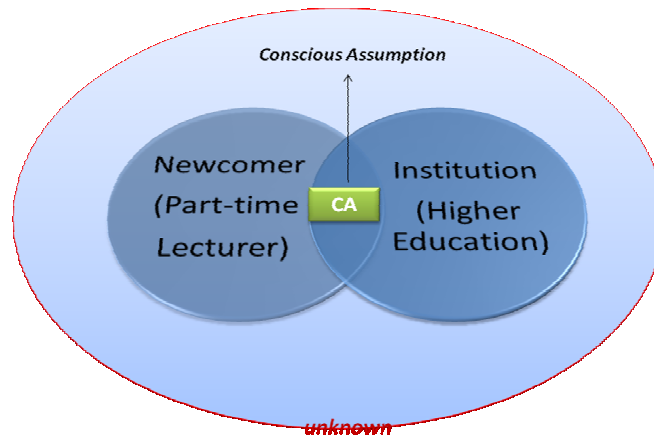


Fig 1. The Theory of Conscious Assumption (Wilson 2009)

Findings highlighted that both partners (the institution and the newcomer) were at risk of taking for granted that information would be provided or that it was known already by the experts arriving. After all, the new teachers had been engaged because of their knowledge, experience and skills to teach the subject. They should therefore know what to do? However, whilst they were confident teachers few had worked in higher education before. The assumptions made during the early transition stage were surrounded also by conscious decision making. For example, the decision to provide or not provide information because it was *assumed* that it was already understood or known. Or, the decision to seek or not seek information because newcomers *assumed* they would be told what they needed to know. This had been the case in their careers so far so why would they expect anything to differ? The findings highlighted that decisions were being made consciously or unconsciously by each of the parties about the other.

Throughout the study these new teachers often stated that they “don’t know what they don’t know”. It was only at the point at which the consciousness was awoken to the fact that something was missing or required that they knew to ask for it or start to search for it. Interestingly, teaching never surfaced as the problem during the early-career stages. This is understandable in a way, because as Trowler (2001:118) highlights academics are usually trained as researchers. This provides orientation to the community. But these new teachers have not entered through the traditional route or been trained to understand the work required of an

academic. They have not arrived trained for University life having taken a different pathway to academia.

This again raises other questions as to whether self-directed learning has a place during the probationary phase for those joining higher education to teach. Knight's (2002:37) stance is one where the early years of academic work is important and needs to be well guided. Smith (2010:578) draws from the work of Knight, Tait, and Yorke (2006) pointing out that that new academics gain value from informal learning and that "learning on the job" is preferred however findings also suggest signposting to acquire knowledge is required to do the job well. Inevitably newcomers embark on a personal learning journey moving through the stages of learning from a state of unconscious incompetence to that of unconscious competence.

Attempting to eradicate the existence of conscious assumption from the probationary phase requires conscious thought in design of interventions, signposting and application. Further thinking gives rise to asking if conscious assumption can be found elsewhere or if it just applies to professional practitioners and part-time teaching staff? The paper concludes considering if this is a concept, reality or inconsequential.

#### References:

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