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Discipline and workplace learning in practice: an exploratory study of academic work[1]

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[1] This photograph was taken in the (shared) office of one of the social scientists who was shadowed for this study. It is reproduced here by kind permission of the occupants.

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Background

This study set out to investigate the 'black box' practices of academic work, and in doing so to contribute to a better understanding of academic work in the social sciences. It sought to illuminate the ways in which the competing 'workplaces' of institution, department and discipline interact, and to explore how these connections and conflicts are experienced and negotiated by academics at different career stages and in different universities. It was conceived as part of a larger and longer-term research project which builds on previous work on the practices of academic work (Malcolm and Zukas, 2009). This now incorporates an oral history project involving retired and semi-retired social scientists (Malcolm, 2013), in which the differences between contemporary and recent-historical experiences of social science practice are explored, and ongoing work on professional learning in practice (Zukas and Kilminster, 2012; Malcolm et al, 2013).

The broad research questions addressed in this overall project are:
Q1. What are the everyday practices of academic work in selected social science disciplines?
Q2. How are the complex relationships between the discipline, the department and the university enacted in the everyday practices of academic work and 'learning in practice'?
Q3. How do these practices and relationships vary over time, discipline and institutional setting?
The SRHE-funded part of the project, to which this report refers, focused principally on the first two questions, but the findings will also contribute to answering the third question.

Methodology

The study was originally designed to investigate the contemporary practices and enactments of academic work in two disciplines from a sociomaterial perspective (Fenwick *et al,* 2011). It was planned as a set of 4 linked case studies, each focused on an established disciplinary department, in two universities. The intention was to utilise ethnographic and visual methods to investigate how selected disciplines are practised in contrasting institutional settings. The analysis would focus on identifying the 'actors' in each setting, and tracing their connections and interactions to illuminate how specific practices and meanings of disciplinary academic work are negotiated, configured and reconfigured within and beyond the department itself. A preliminary comparison would be made between a) how the discipline is practised and maintained in 2 distinctive institutional settings, and b) how practice and workplace pedagogies differ in the 2 disciplines under study.

These case studies were to be based on workplace observation (e.g. meetings; teaching and research activities; technological, collegial and social interaction; ethos, rituals, departmental 'stories'), plus recording and analysis of visual data (e.g. photographs, artefacts, site maps) and institutional documents/ textual objects. In each case the connections made beyond the institution to significant disciplinary networks and organisations were to be examined. Interviews were planned with 4 academic staff in each department, selected to cover a range of career stages and backgrounds, to explore perceptions of how the workplace creates and sustains the disciplinary practices, learning and careers of its members.

Ethical approval was obtained through the Centre for the Study of Higher Education, University of Kent. Professor Mary Hamilton of Lancaster University kindly agreed to act as an informal mentor and critical friend to the project.

Adapting the methods

As reported in the interim report on the project (Malcolm and Zukas, 2014), all did not go to plan. Following administrative delays the completion date for the project was extended to June 2014. Far more serious than these delays, however, were the obstacles the researchers experienced when negotiating access to the proposed research sites. Even when contacts had agreed to the study in principle, and very often we were not able to get beyond this point, it proved impossible to obtain the consent of all members of the academic teams who would be studied. Without general consent, ethnographic fieldwork with this 'knowing' population presented a major challenge. After approaches had been made to 17 different departments it became clear that the resistance to being researched could not really be explained by local difficulties, but was a more systemic issue. Even among academics who themselves engaged in workplace observations of others as part of their own research, there was a distinct unwillingness for their departments to become subjects of observation. Indeed this may help to explain why studies such as those by Swales (1998) or Tuchmann (2009) are few and far between. It is simply more straightforward to get academics to complete questionnaires, or talk about their work in interviews – or indeed to write auto-ethnographically (e.g. Gill, 2009; Watson, 2011) – than to intrude into the privacy of other people's offices, meetings, classrooms, lunchbreaks and supervision discussions armed with recorder, camera and notebook.

Following consultations with SRHE committee members and the project mentor, it was agreed that an alternative design should be developed to get at the data by other means. A further extension to the project was granted to 30 September 2014. The researchers are grateful for this as it has enabled us to get the project off the ground after what seemed an endless series of delays and difficulties. The revised design retained the case-study framework at the institutional level, but replaced general observation of departmental workplaces with 'work shadowing' of individuals. In other respects the data-gathering strategies remained the same. Social science staff in 5 universities were then circulated, via internal contacts, to find volunteers for individual shadowing. There was an immediate and gratifying response to this call for participation, particularly from two universities involved, now identified as Northside and Southside. It thus became possible to construct two case studies of academic work in social sciences in two different institutional settings, shadowing 8 members of academic staff.

Data collection

During the initial fieldwork period (January 2014 – May 2014) the researchers spent a total of 14 days work-shadowing the 8 academics. Each academic was also interviewed, and in 3 cases the fieldwork was followed up by a Skype or telephone interview. All participants signed a consent form, and an information sheet was provided for 'bystanders' – students, colleagues or visitors with whom the participant came into contact during the working day. This explained what the researchers were doing, and gave bystanders the option of asking them to withdraw from the meeting/class/ conversation. The withdrawal option was taken up on only one occasion, when the participant being shadowed felt that an angry confrontation (instigated by him) would not be improved by the

presence of an observer. The academic staff who were shadowed worked in various disciplinary configurations covering Psychology, Sociology, Education, Anthropology and Politics. In outputs from the project, the names of departments have been changed in order to protect the identities of the individuals, departments and universities concerned.

As explained in more detail below, the researchers decided at the end of this first phase (May 2014) to extend the project in order a) to gather more data from younger academics, and b) to provide more comparative data in each of the disciplines in the study. This further phase of the project ran from June – October 2014 and involved a further 6 academics. The budget for the project has now been fully accounted for in accordance with the original proposal, and further expenses related to this final part of the project are being met by our respective universities.

The data now covers 3 universities (Northside, Southside and Cityside) and 14 social scientists from postdoctoral to professorial level. The universities have quite different histories, but we have resisted the common practice of labelling them as 'new', 'old', etc., as these categories tell us very little about what work is done or how; indeed they can be highly misleading in the assumptions they convey about, for example, the age of the institution, or the priority given to research or teaching. Data collection took the form of extensive field notes and photographs, institutional documentation gathered in digital or paper format, including workload allocation models, minutes, prospectuses, web pages, screenshots of email in-boxes, staff policies, etc.; and some participants have also provided photographs of their home workspaces. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant. Some other interactions (such as meetings, informal discussions and supervisions) were also recorded electronically with the permission of the participants. As the final fieldwork comes to an end, we have accumulated field notes, photographs, electronic documents and over 100 sound files covering various interactions with the 14 participants, most of which have now been transcribed.

Analysis
Throughout the project, we have been trying to look at these academic working lives from a sociomaterial perspective, so the categories of analysis emerged from what Latour calls 'following the actors', that is, observing what is present in a situation and what work it is doing. The process of analysis focuses on identifying the actors and practices (social, material, technological, pedagogic, symbolic) observed in each setting, and tracing their connections and interactions – including those which extend beyond the institution with significant disciplinary networks, organisations and media. So tools and artefacts may be significant actors, and actors may be physical, human, textual, virtual, etc. We have tried to avoid becoming locked into an individualised account of a single person's working life, although clearly the individual 'case' has been the way in to the data on the nature of academic work. Observing and listening to individuals has been crucial in helping us to trace how academic work is enacted *in moments of practice* (rather than, as is more common in studies of academic work, recalled in moments of reflection such as interviews). The privileged role of the observer, though clearly not a neutral or invisible one, also helped us to identify multiple actors at work in a situation which might not be immediately apparent to the participants.

The first stage of analysis involved writing up an anonymised case narrative of the data generated around each person, utilising a form of emplotment which balanced the individual, the tools and

technologies they use, the department, the discipline, the university, and other people as actors in a constructed story of the complex sociomaterial practice of academic work. The grouping of these case narratives by institution and by discipline then produced a rich account of how the work of the university, the department and the discipline are carried out on a day-to-day level. It was not surprising that differences emerged at this point (May 2014) in the daily experiences of academics dependent upon their institutional and departmental setting. However it also became clear that the most junior social scientists (including postdocs) were approaching and managing their work in a very different way from their more senior colleagues. As there was also one 'outlier' in disciplinary terms in the group, the researchers decided to gather further data from younger academics and simultaneously to collect more comparative data in each of the disciplines in the study. The intention here was not to produce a 'representative' sample of either age stages or disciplinary affiliations, but rather to ensure that the disciplinary 'cases' were not dependent on a narrative built around one individual, and to provide scope for interrogating generational differences and the ways in which practices change over time (Shove et al, 2012).

The analysis attended closely to the organisation of intellectual, technological, social and physical space (for individuals, work-groups and departments), and the negotiation, mapping and consumption of academics' time (and that of their colleagues, students, significant others), to explore how these enable or constrain particular forms and standards of professional practice. Divergences emerged here across gender, career stages, specialisms and subject combinations, and the scholarly status of the departments concerned; these divergences suggest further productive routes for fine-grained research exploration. From this process we developed a number of 'lenses' through which to interrogate the complexity of working life in these three university settings. Each lens presents us with a set of questions to draw our attention to the interrelationships and interactions of the multiple actors in each department, university and discipline.

Space and place: what space is occupied by the academic; where is working space located, especially in relation to others (e.g. special 'research' building separate from department; shared or private office; entry via a secretary)? How is space distributed (e.g. 'grade 9s are entitled to their own office')? Do they make it their own, and how do they do this (pictures, books, tokens of life beyond the office)? Do they move about during the working day, where do they have to go and for what purposes? How is space outside the workplace used for work (home study, trains, kitchen table)?

Time: How do workplace practices divide up time and how are these divisions understood? What counts as working time? How are work hours calculated and accounted for, and by whom? How does working time relate to the perceptions of academics, students and institutions? How are the various strands of academic work managed in the time available? How do the calendars and rhythms or 'clocks' (Swales, 1998:28) of the various actors –the academic year, the probationary period, 24-hour library opening, the need to eat and sleep, and so on – orchestrate and organise work practices?

Working practices, relationships and tools: to what extent do academics interact with others – and with whom (e.g. secretaries, technicians) – and where does the power lie? Who initiates activity and who is acted upon? How are different aspects of work positioned, shared and valued within academic structures and hierarchies? What freight of meaning attaches to job titles and role

descriptions (e.g. teaching fellow, Reader, graduate studies director, etc.), and how is this meaning enacted? How do multiple electronic tools e.g. work and home computers, phones, laptops, etc., work to enable, channel and constrain academic work? How are they owned, maintained and controlled? What role does email play as a component and mediator of 'work', and how is this managed and organised?

Disciplinary practices and relationships: Is there a strong or weak identification with the discipline, or some kind of 'tribal' affiliation? How are relationships enacted – journals, editorial, conferences, collaboration, prizes, research funding, keynotes? Who knows whom, how are relationships used in developing the disciplinary identity? How far do departmental structures and groupings reflect particular disciplinary understandings? What are the disciplinary hierarchies and subcultures? How much of the disciplinary work is seen as external to the university?

Institutional and departmental practices and relationships: how do academics interact with the University, and how is it present in working life? What work is done by institutional systems to control academic practices, using what tools (policies, procedures, online monitoring systems, etc.)? What is the experience of 'management'? Web presence and corporate image-making: how much control do academics have? Loyalty/respect/ identification with the university: how does this relate to career perceptions (e.g. seeing a post as a stepping-stone to greater things, being in a precarious position)? What distinction is there between relations with the university and relations with departmental or other colleagues? How does the academic have a voice in the university?

Teaching practices and relationships: what counts as teaching, e.g. is supervision teaching or research? How much time and attention is devoted to students collectively or individually? How are they perceived and spoken of? What is the nature of the relationships and interactions (including in-class observations and supervisions)? What is seen as an acceptable class size and teaching load (e.g. 'as a professor I'm expected to have 10 PhD students')? What tools are used for teaching, and why? What constitutes teaching preparation? How is assessment carried out?

The academic as 'person in the world': To what extent are there divisions between work and other aspects of life? How do institutional and departmental policies about work and life play out in the everyday lives of academics? How does the academic live beyond work, and how are the demands of family, health, outside commitments balanced with those seen as 'work'? How are multiple identities managed?

The theme of **learning** emerged within each of these categories – how and why academics adopted particular working practices, the extent to which they were consciously learned or formally taught, the role of other actors in their learning, and in particular how they developed strategies to deal with the conflicts and tensions arising from their working lives.

Ongoing work
The final data-gathering has just been completed in October 2014, and the researchers are still engaged in detailed analysis and in preparing the preliminary outputs from the project (currently 3 conference papers, submitted to SRHE, AERA and EARLI – see below). The richness of the data that

have been gathered means that the study will generate further analysis and new conceptualisations of academic work for some time to come. The researchers are committed to continuing this work over the next 2 years, and the project is included in a book proposal on academic work which is currently in preparation. We also intend to deposit the data with the UK Data Archive for use by other researchers in the future. This plan was included in the project bid and consent forms, and SRHE's permission will of course be sought in relation to those parts of the study funded by the Society. We feel it is particularly important that material from a relatively unusual project is retained and made available to future researchers.

Our initial findings indicate a strong divergence between what is conceived of as disciplinary or 'real' work, and the activities required by the university for its organisational sustenance. It was possible to identify imaginative practices of 'working around' corporate requirements in order to leave space and energy for 'real work' – conceptions of which varied, but which in all cases included disciplinary research and writing. The physical configuration and dispersal of academic work across 'work', 'home', 'the cloud', networks , machines and other, often fleeting, spaces and times (Gornall *et al*, 2013) were key to the illumination of disciplinary practices. All of the academics in the study felt to some extent unable to do their work in the way that they would like to, or to spend as much time on specific tasks as they felt they needed to, so a strong focus here was how they learned and developed strategies to maintain a degree of control in the face of competing pressures.

However, another point which is emerging strongly from the data is the extraordinarily individualised nature of contemporary academic work. Whilst this was not evident in all cases, among the younger male academics in particular there was a tendency to see themselves as lone operators: one took the explicit view that academics are – except in respect of their salaries – 'self-employed'. This is a challenge to the tradition of collegiality so valued in academic folklore (Kligyte and Barrie, 2011), and also evident in the oral history of older academics, many of whom had experience of working in interdisciplinary departments and teaching teams (Malcolm, 2013). It raises questions for the department and institution about the extent to which they promote and reward these discourses and identities – and how this fits with the corporatisation of the university brand. The focus on the construction of an individual research profile and career also suggests that in the nexus of discipline, department and institution, commitment to the development of the disciplinary community as a whole may be fading into the background among younger staff as they negotiate increasingly precarious academic careers.

The points raised in this final section indicate some of the directions in which our analysis is going. In terms of our original objectives, we have amassed a rich collection of data which is enabling us to provide an answer the first question: 'what are the everyday practices of academic work in selected social science disciplines?', using the 'lenses' described in this report. The second question: 'how are the complex relationships between the discipline, the department and the university enacted in the everyday practices of academic work and "learning in practice"?' builds on the answers to the first. It requires multiple iterations of analysis and this is what we are currently engaged in. The data demand a sustained engagement and for this reason we feel the project merits incorporation into a book, rather than simply a series of articles and papers. This is a welcome task and we are grateful for the opportunity this project has given us to engage in it.

Acknowledgements

Project outputs

Malcolm, J. and Zukas, M. (2014) 'Time, space and "real work"', SRHE Annual Conference, December (accepted)

Zukas, M. and Malcolm, J. 'Academic work, the academic workplace and disciplinary identity: the implications for doctoral development', contribution to international symposium on doctoral education, submitted to the American Educational Research Association (AERA) Conference in April 2015 (accepted)

Malcolm, J. paper submitted to European Association for Research in Learning and Instruction (EARLI) conference in August 2015 (under the 'Researcher Education and Careers' SIG).

This work also contributed to the inaugural research meeting of the EARLI Researcher Education and Careers SIG (Barcelona, September 2014), and to a paper in preparation for a special issue of *Frontline Learning Research* in 2015, written in collaboration with other researchers from Spain, Portugal, Mexico and Australia.

In preparation:

2/3 journal articles based on the above conference papers

Book proposal for SRHE series

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