Identity, Scholarship and Professional Recognition in a College of Higher Education

Kirstin Sawyer  |  Graham Stevens*  
Bradford College, Great Horton Road, Bradford BD7 1AY, United Kingdom

ABSTRACT

The “lifeworld” of staff, in a predominantly Further Education college, is examined within the macro framework of Higher Education in Further Education, now referred to as ‘College (based) Higher Education’ (CHE). The concern is with the development of ‘scholar teachers’ after Boyer (1997), in respect of their current self-identity and their aspirations for the future. This self-positioning embraces their experience of the socio-cultural milieu within which they co-exist, their intersubjectivity with others within this context, and the various influencing agents that have been purposely constructed (e.g., fora for dissemination and celebration of scholarly endeavour). All these co-constituted phenomena within the lifeworld of staff are explored in revealing how the past and present create imaginations and plans for what can be in the future. The influence of the accredited (internal) Higher Education Academy Fellowship Scheme is considered. Findings are work-in-progress and further research is required to reveal the ‘essence’ of ‘scholar teacher-hood’.

Keywords
Fellowship  |  Higher education  |  Identity  |  Phenomenology  |  Scholarship  |  Teaching

INTRODUCTION

The expansion of Higher Education (HE), particularly since Dearing (1997), presaged a major transition of the HE landscape and has constituted something of a natural experiment in identity change. We refer here particularly to the widening participation agenda and the situation in which people, who hitherto have had no expectations of academic achievement, and understood that it was not their place to have such expectations, are suddenly invited to see themselves in a very different light. The transitional experiences of this client group are well documented (see for example Wailey and Simpson, 1999; Bowl, 2000; Poleo, 2001; McLean, 2002). However, it is our contention that this shift in self-identity is mirrored, in part, by those charged with providing the set of experiences and environment that drives this process – the academic staff.

In reference to the widening participation agenda, a significant part of the expansion in HE provision has been provided by Further Education (FE) colleges. In many colleges staff teach on both FE and HE courses and their position spans both areas of practice. Management and structuring of this situation is proving to be increasingly difficult as teachers are being pressured to engage in many areas of scholarship to maintain academic standards and
provide a higher education experience that is comparable with universities. The epistemic significance of higher education concerning the boundaries of knowledge, and dealing with what is not known, together with ensuring that the latest technologies are deployed in practice, demands a high level of scholarship, together with its attendant resources (especially the time to do such scholarship). In many regards fulfilling these demands presents a challenge to many College (based) Higher Education (CHE) teachers. However many colleges are grasping the nettle and seeking to provide structures and enabling mechanisms to foster and drive the necessary level of scholarship. Further, the specific nature of College HE is recognised in a number of initiatives. The Association of Colleges (AoC) currently is developing a scholarship framework (AoC, 2017) to characterise and guide the scholarly operations in CHE. This project is underpinned by the work of Boyer (1997) and embraces many vocational and professional practice elements within the conceptualisation of scholarship for CHE.

The setting for this research is Bolford College (pseudonym) which is engaged with the AoC project, yet there are a number of considerations to be made in respect of its identity within CHE generally and the conceptualisation of scholarship particularly. Bolford College has a significant history as an HE provider with a separate faculty structure for HE (recently established), a deliberative HE committee structure, a dedicated set of roles to support HE scholarship, a scholarship and research ‘architecture’ that contains a wide set of mechanisms and arrangements for enabling scholarship, including a workload allocation system for specific scholarly endeavour and a number of dissemination vehicles (e.g., symposia, internal publications). The main feature for this study, however, focusses on Bolford College's accreditation scheme for Fellowship of the Higher Education Academy (HEA). Given its size and stage of development as an HE provider, it is unsurprising that the College was the first of its kind to gain such accreditation, and is now empowered to confer fellowship up to D3 (Senior Fellow) on internal staff members. The College, under the steer from its Learning, Teaching and Assessment strategy, is well placed to ensure all staff have fellowship status within the next two years. Currently fellowship stands at approximately 50%.

So, ideographically, we can conjecture that the typical Bolford College HE practitioner experiences the following:

- Support and guidance from a scholarship and research coordinator;
- Funding to study at level 7 and above;
- Time allocated to their workload for scholarship;
- College funding for external activity (e.g., conferences, workshops);
- Mentorship to become a Fellow/Senior Fellow of the HEA (without incurring personal financial cost);
- Regular attendance and occasional contribution at various internal scholarly events;
- Submission to internal publications that are peer reviewed;
- Engagement with the appropriate Professional Accreditation, Professional Statutory and Regulatory Bodies (PSRB);
- Intersubjectivity with like-minded scholar teachers who are energetically (to varying degrees) pursuing scholarship and the resultant enhancement of their practice. This includes guidance from line management and senior staff tasked with staff development (especially scholarship);
- Encouragement and celebration for all scholarly endeavour through the ‘Scholarship and Research (SAR) architecture’;
- Membership of formal committees and working groups;
- Enjoyment of their scholarship manifested in their engagement with colleagues and students often generating scholarly output, and in conjunction with the faculty ‘research centre’.

In sum, then, this is a professional and personal experiential environment that is rich in the opportunities to take forward one's 'identity project' (Harre, 1983).

**Professional Identity Development**

Trede et al. (2012) examined the extant literature on professional identities and concluded that, amongst other aspects, further research is needed to better understand the role of workplace learning on professional identities. It is this issue to which we direct our attention, and we do so with a particular approach that is currently underplayed in this ambit of investigation. This is not to say our work is unique as there are elements within the literature of experiential and ideographic methods being deployed in revealing the lived experience of HE academics, usually in a university setting. Clegg focussed on the lived experience of university practising academics and found that identity is 'part of the lived complexity of a person's project' (Clegg, 2008, p. 37) and despite all the pressures of performance, respondents were able to exercise 'principled autonomy and agency'. The issues of project and agency are at the heart of our analysis in revealing the fragments of the "lifeworld".

Henkel (2010) examined the global context of 'HE massification' and the concomitant shift in HE professional identities. She concluded that, 'universities have had
to equip themselves to confront complexity, novelty and instability... and that the implications for the composition and structures of their workforces and for career trajectories are profound’ (Henkel, 2010, p. 74).

As discussed above, the process of ‘massification’ has also impacted upon higher education providers outside the university sector, especially within the agenda to ensure scholarly endeavour meets the demands of the curriculum and the quality of provision, as directed by Government through various agencies. This has been particularly acute in CHE.

So what are the influences of macro changes on the lives of CHE scholar teachers at the level of everyday interactions? To address this we attended to the notion of career trajectory within everyday lived experience and the shift (if any) of professional identity. Sutherland et al. (2010) examined the development of pre-service teachers’ self-image and the movement from student to teacher. They noted how, through developing a ‘voice’ (a shift in discourse) in their intersubjective transactions with colleagues, and as an outcome of reflective musings, their respondents demonstrated the construction of an evolving identity that moved towards a more professional stance in their contributions to discussion with colleagues. Clarke et al. (2013) argued that professional identity for academics in HE is not a stable entity rather that it is ‘complex, personal and shaped by competing definitions’ (Clarke et al., 2013, p. 108). We concur with this view and, to examine this complexity, we deploy an existential phenomenological approach, supported by the theoretical literature on identity.

Theoretical Background and Methodological Considerations

We are concerned here with the concept of identity and identity (re)construction i.e., the processual nature of identity. This further offers some understanding of the notion of multiplicity within the various commentaries on the postmodern (see for example Giddens, 1991; Jenkins, 1996). Our approach attempts to embrace the interiority of self-identity construction in that we follow the phenomenological tradition of the co-constitutionality of the self. For example, Merleau-Ponty’s emphasis is on the inseparability of self and world as stated in his often quoted epigram, ‘man[sic] is in the world and only in the world does he know himself’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 11).

So we consider this position on self-identity as applied to the world of scholar-teachers at Bolford College as they present with the process of being a self and the lived-through experiences within the scholarly environment described above. However, we have a further consideration that refers to the decision to establish a professional identity that is in harmony with the HE notion of scholar-teacher. That the past, present and future imaginations conceive of a trajectory that is one of consolidating a self-identity that is bound by the requirements of being an HE teacher, with all its scholarly accoutrements. We attempted to focus in on certain life events that are significant in the “lifeworld”. Giddens (1991, p. 143) has called these ‘fateful moments’:

‘Fateful moments are transition points which have major implications not just for the circumstances of an individual’s future conduct, but for self-identity. For consequential decisions, once taken, will reshape the reflexive project of identity through the lifestyle consequences which ensue.’

The Existential Phenomenological Position on Identity

Following Merleau-Ponty and the phenomenological tradition in general, this position holds that each of us requires the existence of others in order that we are to be able to define who we are. So our focus was on intersubjectivity - a complex interaction between two persons (e.g., colleagues that have had a significant influence as part of the socio-cultural milieu). Communication from this perspective is not just a matter of listening to words, but is an immediate reality of pre-reflective experience. For Merleau-Ponty (1974) the other’s consciousness exists, as it were, not ‘in’ the other, but behind and around me. Craib (1998, p. 39) explains it as follows:

‘Insofar as language is an object in my world as in his, we are joined together through it: when I listen to the other speak or read what he has written, I enter into his consciousness, discover his meanings through my meanings. After reading, listening, it is possible to say – Merleau-Ponty quotes Paulan – in this light at least I have been you.

Methodology

To date 16 participants have been involved, all with varying experience as HE practitioners. Our aim, within an inductive approach, was to describe the lived-through experience of participants with a focus on the scholarly environment described above (see interview foci in appendix A). Consistent with existential phenomenological psychology, we focussed on the concept of “lifeworld” (see Heidegger, 1962). Our methodology then, in sum, was “lifeworld analysis” deploying –phenomenological description - to move from individual psychological
structures to a general psychological structure in revealing the “eidos” of HE practitioner-ship in an HE in FE college context.

We conducted ‘quite conversational interviews’, deploying the ‘traveller metaphor’ (see Kvale, 1996). This metaphor refers to a postmodern constructive approach to social research, and reflects the emergent nature of constructed knowledge in the interview encounter. Any presupposition was subjected to ‘bracketing’ notwithstanding the use of interview foci (see appendix A) that explored the participants’/co-researchers’ professional lives and who they were, who they are - who they are hoping to become (transcending what they are now).

All participants were fully briefed on the process and gave their signed consent. They were assured of confidentiality (e.g., use of pseudonyms in the data analysis and when reporting findings) and at the conclusion of the interviews they were given a synopsis of the interview content and gave written consent for the material to be used in publications.

The data analysis referred to imaginative variation via the phenomenological reduction and ad-hoc meaning generation (Kvale, 1996). The data analysis of the individual interviews was deployed to reveal the essence of being a practitioner in context. This process involved reference to the ‘fragments of the lifeworld’ (see Ashworth, 2003, pp. 147-151) especially: temporality, embodiment, spatiality, discourse, selfhood and project.

Findings

The interviews conducted thus far, have demonstrated a thoughtful and insightful approach to participants’ professional learning. Backgrounds included many who had previously been in FE, and a number who had moved straight into HE from various professional practice careers (e.g., youth work, coaching, management). Dual professionalism has long been associated with the careers of FE lecturers (Clow, 2001) in terms of shaping their professional identity and its benefits in informing their professional practices and ability to support students’ future employability. The move into HE meant that some participants could be deemed to be ‘tri professionals’. That their professional identity has to span the external professional world (e.g., law, the art world, nursing, social work) and the bi-orbital experience of moving from FE – yet retaining the appropriate skills set – and into HE with a distinctive and different ethos.

Interviewees (pseudonyms deployed below) were clear that FE and HE were different in their nature and demands and they were able to reflect on and explain how they could take the best of both existential orbits and create something new in terms of their own professional practice, aligned to their own personal project. They were also very aware that they also needed to instil a critical awareness of the issues in the students’ future professional world and the higher level of subject knowledge that underpinned it.

The transition between their previous professional self to the present, and temporally reaching out to the future presented many challenges. This ‘new learning’ was not seen as a problem, indeed all saw the move into HE as positive as they enjoyed working with the students, enhancing their own knowledge and developing new skills and the associated selfhood. However, challenges that presented some existential anxiety were ubiquitous and scaled from the odd psychological irritant to a much deeper worry. Some declared a suffering from imposter syndrome - an insecurity about whether they had the necessary level of knowledge required to teach at undergraduate level. They were also uncomfortable with the emerging identity of ‘scholar’ and one way this exhibited itself was in a lack of confidence in presenting at conferences or writing for publication. This was a large step out of an orbit that is known to one that is not.

Unfortunately notions of ‘academic isolation’ from the HE ethos were a further concern in that there was discomfort regarding the expectations within the new orbit. How to live one’s ‘scholar teacher-hood’ was problematized. These anxieties do dissipate, however, as intersubjectivity with others develops:

‘Being able to work alongside and communicate with other HE colleagues teaching other disciplines is really helpful in professional development’; (Geoff).

Increased immersion in the scholarly endeavour was seen as an ‘addiction’ and led to feelings of greater self-efficacy – a greater sense of voice and presence in everyday professional life with colleagues and students. This was described by one interviewee as ‘scholarly thrill’ associated with ‘an academic debate that I was missing’; (Mike).

Simultaneously this new orbit offered up a resolution to earlier cravings for ‘intellectual analyses’. The embodied dimension of such analyses was described; ‘it feels like your brain is a muscle that you are working’; (Keith).

The HEA accreditation scheme at Bolford College is voluntary. All saw their HEA Fellowship as a quality
The self-learning and sense of trajectory and distance travelled in their identity project that came from the process of constructing their reflective account – and thereby a deep analysis of professional accomplishments - was also seen as significant. Fellowship was a position statement about self and provided a reflective moment that brought together a more coherent professional identity – there were disparate links up to this point. The experience of reflection led to a realisation of the full dimensions of what had been achieved:

'It put it all together for me'; (Diane).

Gaining fellowship prompted further formal CPD such as a Masters or PhD as they found the process of study and writing rewarding.

The identity project that came into play was a corollary of the decision to seek Senior Fellowship of the HEA and to be immersed in a scholarly culture. The previous orbit of experience that had pertained, that of a developing academic, yet not seeing oneself as one, not 'at one' with the emerging selfhood that was being illuminated, was now being distanced and a new era of selfhood began to take hold.

'I could now go and get it' (i.e. academia/scholarship trajectory); (Mike).

'There had been a mining of me' (a deep reflective process that had revealed a series of characteristics not in full awareness); (Mike).

The Fellowship 'kitemark' had set in train an acceleration of the earlier trajectory shift. There was greater embodied experience of 'belongingness with the (generic HE) academic'.

..you can do it [HE]...you belong... it justifies you as an HE teacher.‘; (Holly).

New discourse developed such as a languaging of a more assertive and prominent self within the HE orbit. Fellowship presented an 'identity package' of HE practitioner and the commensurate scholarly endeavour. This lived through experience was scaffolded constantly by the kitemark of 'Fellow of the Higher Education Academy'.

The 'package' metaphor is useful. Regarding the fragment of temporality, interviewees could express a trajectory of the past, present and future as an ipsative exercise that sets them up for new imaginings of what is possible in their life project. The scholarly milieu that they had entered, with 'Fellowship' as a major characteristic, together with all the formal and informal communities of practice, offers up an increasingly empowered space. For example 'Kim' has a crusading project of effecting social change through the process of the educational enterprise, particularly in HE. The Fellowship of the Higher Education Academy (FHEA) has given her an otherness – a community of practice within which drivers from her past can be harnessed and the 'battle ... of oppression can be won'.

This otherness has assisted the sense of openness – the FHEA a proud mark of belonging to a group that has the transformational quality of good teaching at its heart. The influence of the scholarly environment is subtle yet strong and pervasive. She is within a space of "a culture of respect".

The whole package has been inspirational through its continual permeability of what is a professional – and how this helps the emerging self-improvisation of a professional/scholarly academic identity that has important pragmatics to do ‘battle'. A quest for social justice by being within an army of like-minded critical thinkers, recruiting many more to the cause through the educative process.

**CONCLUSION**

We have been concerned with the development of scholar teachers in their complex construction of a professional identity that is 'at oneness' with the world in the day-to-day lived through experience of working in an FE college that provides higher education. We have focussed on the potential influences involved in the processual nature of self-identity. The model of self-improvisation in play echoes Merleau-Ponty's position in that, through our actions to be a self, we borrow from the world, from others, and from our own past efforts (O'Neill, 1974). The "lifeworld analyses," thus far in this research, reflect this position in reference to the influence of others and the immersion in an HE ethos with an accredited fellowship (Higher Education Academy) scheme as a main element. The trajectory of self that is described involves some considerable existential pioneerism in self-improvisation that is existentially a source of anxiety yet simultaneously a source of joy. The latter is founded in some individual work on a felicific calculus to create a self that 'works' in the world. As the trajectory from one self to another becomes realised however, there is always concern about the 'spectre of failure' and is this self-identity that I experience as me, really me? Confidence issues still haunt the existent, yet the trajectory continues “unabashed" for the most part. For Holly, present muses on recent work boosts self-efficacy in the scholarly orbit, a comparative self to the past when she was ‘in awe' (of other academic presenters) at a national conference. There is a cyclical spatial notion that the
previous self as “attender-in-awe” has become a present self as (confident) “presenter-at-conference” that is bodied forth to a self that can become a main player within the profession, with a conditional ‘care professional before academic’.

More research is needed to concretise (as far as is possible) the current trends described, and to reveal the essence of scholar teacher-hood, and also to examine the future development of participants and their sustained or inhibited trajectory. Moving out of the phenomenological perspective, the impact of the accredited fellowship scheme can then be subject to further evaluation, together with the constructed scholarly environment. The influence of macro activity in CHE (e.g., the AoC scholarship scheme) may also come into focus.

REFERENCES


AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The authors confirm being the sole contributors of this work and approved it for publication.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Copyright

© 2018 Sawyer and Stevens. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY). The use, distribution or reproduction in other forums is permitted, provided the original author(s) or licensor are credited and that the original publication in this journal is cited, in accordance with accepted academic practice. No use, distribution or reproduction is permitted which does not comply with these terms.