

Title: PRACTITIONERS WHO TEACH: PROFESSIONAL IDENTITIES AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

This paper reports on research into the experiences and perceptions of novice and experienced professional practitioners in disciplines such as Health, Law and Performing Arts, simultaneously engaged in HE teaching. Being taught by someone who brings current professional knowledge and perspectives is seen as fruitful for students and the academy. However practitioner academics may experience disorientation and insecurity attempting to make sense of significantly different worlds. What are the implications for their professional development?

Introduction

A number of theoretical perspectives inform the background to this paper. There is a rich and extensive literature about the socialisation of new academic staff into the academy (eg Akerlind 2004; Henkel 2000; Knight, Tait & Yorke 2006) and the ways in which new academics construct their sense of identity of themselves and within their community of practice (CoP) (eg Clegg 2008, Eraut 2000, Lave & Wenger 1998). Universities themselves have evolved considerably in response to a number of policy initiatives (such as, in the UK, the 1997 [Dearing Report](#), the 2004 [Leitch Report](#), the 2010 [Browne Review](#)) which have led to particular challenges in terms of (re-) defining the nature and purpose of Higher Education, how the curriculum is shaped, the nature of academic work and how all these might be experienced by someone becoming an academic (eg Becher & Trowler 2001) in relation to their professional identity. The central consideration for the research project on which this paper is based looks at these from the perspective of individuals whose professional work and identities involves moving between these two worlds rather than making a single transition from professional practice into a Higher Education role, those who Clegg (2008) has termed **pracademics**.

There are reported benefits in employing professional practitioners. Universities can claim a richer curriculum linked to authentic workplace contexts; departments can draw on both an individual's expertise and industry contacts to enrich curriculum content, attract guest speakers, organise placements and the like. Students are likely to enjoy and benefit from being taught by someone with current professional practice experience. However this research project focused particularly on the benefits (or not) for the practitioner teachers themselves, through considering three key questions:

- (i) What are the opportunities and tensions for the practitioner teacher in the HE environment?

- (ii) How do they attempt to make sense of what is expected, either implicitly or explicitly?
- (iii) What factors make this venture more likely to succeed?

The responses to these questions lead to a discussion of the implications for the professional development of these staff.

The theoretical perspectives which inform these questions include work undertaken in a range of institutions and subject areas. Boyd and Harris (2010) consider the experiences of teachers moving into a role as teacher educators, the significance of academic induction in supporting this new generation of teacher educators and how they attempt to navigate the tensions between their academic and professional fields. These include, for example,

'...tensions between institutional strategic requirements, which include a focus on research activity, and the pressures within the professional field, which include a punitive inspection regime, to be a credible school teacher.' (2010:20)

Shreeve (2011) considers the different ways in which creative arts practitioners describe their experiences of the relationships between practice and teaching. She notes in particular the effect of

'... the negative experience of relations between practice and teaching..... leaving the individual in limbo between two social practices.' (2011:79)

and identifies five distinct categories for the ways in which practitioners and teachers in creative arts experience relations between practice and teaching. In summary, these are

- Asymmetrical, prioritising practice: tutor passes on practice knowledge to the student
- Asymmetrical, prioritising teaching: replicating the practice experience for students
- Symmetrical: balanced but distinct relationship between practice and teaching
- Symmetrical: tutors learn from teaching and envisage teaching when in practice
- Holistic: no boundaries between practice and teaching

The literature also explores the effects of wider changes. Jawitz (2009) considers the effect of expansion of a department originally established in the 1970s. The original ethos of the department had been to build a strong educational programme, with limited emphasis on either professional practice or the development of original research. The expansion of the department and changes in leadership in the course of the late 1980s led to a somewhat uneasy co-existence of three distinct communities of practice. These comprised junior and middle academics teaching undergraduates; senior academics undertaking postgraduate teaching, engaging in research or professional practice; and experienced professionals contributing to teaching who either were or aspired to be senior academics themselves. Jawitz notes that while the influence of the professional community of practice was mutually beneficial for senior academics, junior colleagues perceived this as being at the expense of involvement in teaching and in limiting their senior colleagues' contribution to the general culture and leadership in the department.

*'At stake appeared to be the commitment that individual academics displayed to their participation **in one or the other** (my emphasis) of the teaching and professional communities of practice (2009:245)'*

Those whose identity was closely bound up in professional practice also had a (possibly unintentional) effect on the career trajectories of their junior colleagues seeking to develop their research profile as

'The absence of a research CoP in the department was related to the fact that the outputs of practice most valued in the professional CoP, namely physical products produced for commercial purposes, were not regarded as research outputs by the broader academic community.' (2009:247)

Jawitz cites Wenger's forms of identity trajectories as a way of describing the possible relationships an individual can have within a community of practice, crucially noting that this trajectory is likely to change over time. These are termed

- Inbound: newcomers invest their identity as a future full member
- Boundary: newcomers aim to sustain participation across the boundaries of different CoPs
- Peripheral: significant but limited (from own choice) participation in a community
- Outbound: being directed out of a community but 'seeing the world and oneself in different ways.'

(Wenger in Jawitz 2009:243)

Santoro and Snead (2012) consider the extent of engagement in relation to two aspects: what practitioners expected of academe, what they experienced and the tensions about the gap between the two. They note a tendency among their survey participants (who represented a range of disciplines, HE and professional experience) to

'...experience nostalgia...for what has been termed 'the golden age' of the past when universities were places for the intellectual elite and sought to produce the whole person who seeks knowledge for its own sake.' (2012:389)

They looked particularly at practitioners' responses on being appointed on teaching and research contracts, noting that

'They had already forged strong identities as practitioners ...maintained strong connections to their professions and resisted, to varying degrees, the imperative to research.' (2012:390)

Santoro and Snead argue that this tension is evident in

'...literature that suggests professionals in the field can often be suspicious or dismissive of their academic counterparts whose work they regard as lofty in theory but useless in practice.' (2012: 391)

What, then, are the possible implications of these tensions for professional practitioners also engaged in HE work? What do they believe their work entails? How (or if) do they deal with changes in their understanding of its purpose and nature, as it might be enacted in different disciplinary, institutional and cultural contexts? As a consequence, what kinds of professional development are appropriate to address the challenges of contexts in which they are working?

Method

The project was funded through a small grant from an [Education Research Centre](#) in the author's institution.

This study was designed to draw out data from practitioners engaged in HE teaching, across a variety of disciplines and with differing amounts of experience. Potential participants were identified within two main areas: academic departments which included practitioner teachers, and specialist institutions employing professional practitioners to teach their HE provision. There were two data instruments. The first was an online questionnaire with anonymised return, circulated to all relevant staff by the Head of Department or Director of HE, to be returned directly to the author. This was based on the assumption that Heads were best placed to alert staff for whom the questionnaire would be relevant, but that Heads should not be involved in subsequent data traffic. The detailed aim was to ensure that a spread of participants had the opportunity to respond if they wished and that participants were assured of confidentiality. The end of the questionnaire invited participants to provide the author with an email address if they were willing to participate in recorded semi-structured interviews. Again, participants were assured of confidentiality, the right to check the transcript from the interview and draft of the analysis, and the right to withdraw from data collection at any stage.

All returned questionnaires were coded numerically to ensure anonymity; all interview recordings and transcripts were kept securely during the time period of the study, as were participants' permissions for anonymised quotations from either questionnaire or interview to be used in published work. The aim, again, was to gather rich data in a confidential setting, given the considerable sensitivities attached for participants talking about their previous and current workplaces.

The online questionnaire was launched early in the Spring Term (February) with an explanatory message detailing the purpose of the research and with a 4-week deadline for return. The questionnaire covered five broad areas

- (i) Relevant personal details: age range, gender, professional and academic qualifications, years in professional and academic post(s)
- (ii) HE experience: type(s) of HEI, nature of current role and responsibilities
- (iii) The advantages and disadvantages of combining HE work and professional practice
- (iv) The extent to which individuals feel these two activities are complementary or conflicting
- (v) Examples of (formal or non-formal) strategies and professional development which assist in their dual roles

A total of twenty people responded to the questionnaire, of whom 5 volunteered to participate in follow-up semi-structured interviews, with one subsequently withdrawing due to pressure of time. As respondents were geographically scattered, three interviews were conducted face to face and the remaining one by phone, all at times of participants' choosing within a specified 4-week period to ensure that the research project could maintain momentum. The aim of the semi-structured approach was to provide a framework for the key research questions while ensuring that participants did not feel unduly constrained. The main interview questions were:

- (i) How someone responds when they are asked what they do
- (ii) How they see the relationship between their HE teaching and their professional practice
- (iii) Their experience of initial and continuing integration into the expectations of their HE role
- (iv) The characteristics of useful interventions/support
- (v) How they see the next few years in their career(s) as HE practitioners and professional practitioners

Respondents (50/50 males/females) represented

- a range of disciplines: Law, Medicine, Creative and Performing Arts, Architecture
- different types of institutions : there was a 50/50 split between those teaching in pre-'92 universities and those teaching in specialist institutions
- different ages and extent of experience: 40% were aged 50- 60 and had 10+ years of each of practice and teaching experience; 60% aged 30- 50 had 10+ years of professional experience and 2-5 years of HE teaching
- different contracts of employment: 25% were on permanent academic contracts, 25% on permanent fractional contracts, the remainder were hourly paid

All but two, who had research as a significant proportion of their workload, had responsibilities for teaching and associated administration in HE. Respondents (henceforth identified by number eg **R3**) and interviewees (henceforth identified by letter eg **I2**) reported varying amounts of their time spent in professional practice, with the greatest number (75%) reporting that they spent between 50% and 80% of their time on this, although the interviews suggested that a significant minority (30%) regarded their HE environment as a significant component of their professional practice.

Findings

Professional practitioners undertaking HE teaching believed that the **advantages for their students' learning** of being taught by people in professional practice were manifestly clear.

'...these lead to an appreciation of the profession they are aiming to join' (R4)

'... exposure to real-world approaches and...opportunities for work experience and employment' (R3)

'...being at the very threshold of practice (with the)insight of the practising artist with relevant skillset and specialist knowledge.' (R5)

'Opportunities to get into professional networks.' (R14)

They had more conflicted views of the potential and actual **benefits for professional practitioners** of combining practice and HE teaching, a conflict which appeared to intensify

rather than diminish over time. More experienced practitioners (10+ years of both professional practice and HE teaching) expressed the idea that this

'...enables me to continue work which I have enjoyed for over thirty years [but which] detracts from my available time for research and is not deemed as producing impact.' (R12)

'...is a useful way of sharing expertise [but] teaching seems to be valued below research.' (R8)

'... (Means) I have ended up feeling like neither fish nor fowl...someone who does not fit in either category, but I don't say that in any negative sense because I don't see how it could be otherwise. I'm aware of having made decisions when I actively chose not to re-engage in fulltime professional ministry... I have made choices and do accept that you live with the consequences of those choices.' (R2)

For many, despite these challenges, their dual roles had positive aspects

'Teaching allows a flexibility of thought and an opportunity to reflect on practice carried out in the real world.' (R6)

'It allows me to keep my teaching current in terms of the context of performance.' (R10)

'I see an incredibly strong relationship between my professional practice and my teaching and I've got past the point of trying to be over-reserved and withdrawn about it.' (I 1)

Personal satisfaction was a recurring theme, linked particularly to practitioners' sense of their credibility with their students as current practitioners in the professional sphere.

'It gives me a satisfying and varied career and an impetus to keep up to date.' (R11)

Practitioners with fewer than five years' experience of HE teaching focused both on the practical challenges:

'... my clients and fellow professionals expect 9- 5 availability, 5 days a week, regardless of HE commitments.' (R3)

'Teaching takes time, preparation and commitment – and these resources are limited, making the time devoted unwieldy.' (R5)

They did, however, identify opportunities which combining the two offered:

'... opportunities and freedom to explore ideas that the constraints of a client rarely gives rise to.' (R4)

'...contributing to the knowledge of tomorrow' (R5)

'... maintaining the ability to develop myself and increase knowledge.' (R7)

'It is a wonderful experience, a beautiful thing, extremely, extremely hard.... hard because finding yourself as one of the youngest faculty members it is very hard to articulate a voice. (But) proximity to student work... helping people wrap their heads around complex issues, that's the most rewarding for me.' (I 2)

Perceptions of identity HE teaching and professional practice was more mixed. Responses in the light of the categories identified by Shreeve and referenced to Wenger's identity trajectory revealed that

- 50% of respondents saw the relationship of practice and teaching as asymmetrical, prioritising the tutor passing on practice knowledge. All but one of these respondents identified themselves as being boundary members, aiming to sustain participation in multiple communities. They acknowledged the positive aspects for them.

' My expertise permits me to see synergies between my field of practice and the concentration of my HE discipline.' (R 12)

' Teaching in the context of performance has changed the way I approach certain skills, based on the uncertain environments we find ourselves in.' (R 17)

- 35% identified a symmetrical balance, where they learned from their teaching and also envisaged teaching when they were in practice. They, too, identified chiefly as boundary participants, although two commented that they felt they had exercised some degree of choice about the extent of their participation which they defined as peripheral.

'Dealing with clinical scenarios, able to translate knowledge learnt back to practice and from that take it back to the classroom.' (R7)

' My discipline IS practice based' (R16)

'...the synergies between the two allows for real innovation... in teaching and research' (R13)

While

' Belonging to two communities is by far the most relevant factor (although) time/financial/personal resources constraints affect the performance and participation in both.' (I 1)

- 10% identified their work as having a balanced but distinct relationship between practice and teaching, and located themselves on the periphery ie significant but limited (from choice) in the HE community

'It's very hard not to draw parallel lines, you know, thinking about issues that move beyond an individual's practice into a larger domain.' (I 2)

- 5% saw the relationship between their professional practice and HE teaching as holistic and did not see themselves as being members of an HE Community of Practice at all.

'I do not see myself as a member of a disciplinary community, possibly because I do not believe the education department at my university values my area of teaching..... I do not do research into education.' (R9)

'These days professional practice is not seen as equivalent to research in terms of impact.' (R 13)

'In many respects I just feel a total fraud.' (R 14)

One respondent, training community pharmacists, saw the role as replicating practice experience.

Establishing expectations

This was identified by many as complex territory. Interviewee 2 encapsulates three key areas: new responsibilities, formal learning and engagement with colleagues

'... I didn't really realise what I was signing up foruntil I became a pathway co-ordinator it hit me...being more of a fulltime person with added responsibilities made it more apparent. Taking two PGCerts in Education I guess helped to formalise the change in a way and...colleagues were very very important to me.'

Several respondents who had experienced periods of change of emphasis over time commented on the challenges of changing expectations as the scale, context or mission of their work changed

'There's been absolutely no change in the atmosphere and congeniality of the section..... but now there are only two who remember the old days and (the new Head of School) is moving much more towards an interesting new mix. We're on the margins now.' (I 1)

'....I really enjoy doing research.... I completely understand the complex politics and everything else associated with the REF but it's part and parcel of finding a platform to move things forward but there is this huge history of resistance in the art world to art research.' (I 2)

'Teaching the sort of subjects that I do has led to an attitude of dismissiveness from some of my colleagues who do not consider professional practice to be a subject of work.' (R9)

Irrespective of the level of experience, respondents identified a number of key factors which were relevant to their professional development in their dual roles. Chief among these were

- An acknowledgement by colleagues and the university more broadly of the value of the practitioner perspective
- Recognition for work carried out in practice and in teaching
- A recognition of the challenges of competing priorities imposed from both disciplines
- Active collaboration and open-mindedness in and between the disciplinary and practice communities
- Opportunities for integration into HE departmental life

The surveys and interviews also revealed the extent to which respondents valued a combination of opportunities to learn and develop, both formally (for example through participating in university-wide events and programmes) and informally, through interactions with colleagues. While this is consistent with findings more broadly across the sector, of particular interest for this group of staff is the extent to which they feel their dual identities are recognised and supported, the balance which is struck between their practice and HE worlds and the opportunities for their initial and ongoing professional development.

Over 80% of respondents identified collaboration with colleagues (in the HE and professional workplaces) as central to their professional learning and development. Typical comments included

'I learn and develop from all the work I do.'

'Participating in the wider academic community for me has always been a lot less formal but also important.'

'Informal groupings are a lot more frequent and carry more weight...but they are estranged from institutions in the general sense.'

'Very little can prepare you for the job..... fascinating, challenging and so complex it cannot be anything but exciting.'

The process of working with students was also identified as a significant force.

'I have become much more aware from experience of working with students and my own studies.'

'There is real enjoyment in watching students learn and produce new ideas and ways of thinking that you hadn't thought of before.'

One respondent commented that induction processes tended to be episodic, run centrally over – typically - half a day or a day, but offering little insight into how an individual might make more sense of their working environment. He suggested that

'Being allowed to know why things happen would be interesting.'

This is consistent with the earlier comment about the sense of disconnect between institutional structures and behaviours and the informal groupings in which learning occurs more spontaneously and frequently.

Discussion

This study drew on the experiences of people who described themselves as practitioners and teachers. The scale of this first phase of the study was relatively small and there is much more to be done, particularly in terms of interviewing as the interviews enabled participants to expand on their experiences and perceptions more fully. There is, too, further work to be undertaken to see if there is a correlation between the length of involvement with HE and the range of the work done. For example, is the perception of someone who has been working in HE for 2 hours per week for 5 years different to that of someone who is working closer to fulltime hours in their first HE post?

Although relatively few of the respondents in this investigation were fulltime academics, many were working hours in HE which would normally be associated with substantive posts while maintaining and developing their professional practice lives. A significant proportion had been doing so for a number of years. Where people had extensive experience in both HE and professional practice, these experiences had coincided with periods of change in both and the ways in which an individual interpreted and mediated these changes contributed to how they saw themselves as professionals in practice. They had seen both contexts and roles change and, from their perspective, had tried to accommodate these. Those with less experience were in the process of trying to reconcile the different roles with varying degrees of success, both as a result of practical challenges such as time and a sense of having limited agency and voice in the wider institution. There were features common to both groups, some positive and others less so. Both groups identified the satisfaction which they got from seeing students flourish as a central motivation and source of personal pride. They saw informal participation within the disciplinary and professional communities as being the next most significant feature in terms of having a sense both of expectations and of belonging, to the extent that they wanted to belong. Where practitioners had negative feelings or experiences, these were to do with lack of recognition of their professional roles or a lack of acknowledgement of the value of it for their HE work. (Since those surveyed were necessarily those who were still involved in the two communities it is clearly not possible to draw any conclusions about people who had disengaged completely.) The qualitative comments support Shreeve's observation that

' Where these different aspects of one's identity are not reconciled, there appears to be less than satisfactory engagement in academia. ' (2011:87)

Finally, what are the implications for the professional development of staff straddling these communities? There is strong evidence for professional development which helps people position themselves in their multiple roles, affirms the strengths and expertise which the professional practitioner brings to bear on her/his role as an educator, and which affords the practitioner opportunities to see synergies rather than conflicts between their practice and their educator roles. Disciplinary discourses and encounters need to assist in this process, both by valuing practitioner expertise and enabling the practitioner to consider how they might develop further in their career, for example through exposure to scholarly or research networks. The privileging of a particular kind of research output requires more than institutional action; rather it requires reinterpretations across the academic community. Finally, those of us with responsibility for the academic and professional development of others need to foster context-sensitive, local and cross-institutional environments where synergies and opportunities can be created for interdisciplinary engagements. This work is

not only for the benefit of this group of staff but strengthens working relationships for all in the academy.

Practical implications

- consider current and potential development opportunities for practitioners who teach in HE
- identify sources of initial (eg induction) and continuing professional development which may assist this group
- identify strategies for integrating practitioner teachers into the broader academic community
- identify institutional structures which do (or could) recognise and reward academic work in its different forms

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