Teaching in Higher Education

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cthe20

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Version of record first published: 08 Sep 2009

To cite this article: Deborah Churchman & Sharron King (2009): Academic practice in transition: hidden stories of academic identities, Teaching in Higher Education, 14:5, 507-516

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13562510903186675

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Academic practice in transition: hidden stories of academic identities

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Academic work is becoming increasingly restrictive and controlled as tertiary institutions move towards a more corporate managerialistic mode of operating. This paper uses a narrative lens to explore the ways in which academic staff make sense of this new environment. In particular, it compares academic staff’s stories of their worklife with the official organisation’s representative stories promulgated by the university. The study examines the ways academic staff make sense of their workplace when the corporate stories no longer reflect their views of work, institution or personal values. Data gathered during a world café event depict two constructions of academic identity and compare these private stories with the public stories provided by the university. The paper concludes by addressing some of the concerns inherent in the loss of plurality that occurs when tertiary institutions move towards an homogenised environment.

Keywords: identity; academic practice; sensemaking; higher education

Introduction

This paper explores the ways in which academic staff make sense of some of the recent changes to their work practices, which call into question their workplace identity. Identity perspectives focus on members’ understanding of ‘who they are’ and the ways in which this influences, and is influenced by, what they do at work. Through a narrative lens, this understanding is expressed as stories which reflect the worker as a character in their workplace landscape. These stories are constructed within a context and, in the case of tertiary institutions, this is an increasingly restrictive and controlled context with an unprecedented rate of change (Marginson 2000). As the university environment moves towards a new corporate/commercial form, places for the stories reflecting a time of more autonomy for academic staff may no longer reflect the new context.

There have been significant strategic efforts within higher education institutions to create a new corporate public image (Svensson and Wood 2007). Balmer and Gray (1999) comment on the importance universities place on strategically managing their images to ensure that they attract customers. Part of this strategy involves academic institutions providing new language and new stories which academic staff are encouraged to adopt to help them to make sense of the new context and their place in it. These stories refer to characters to be emulated and activities to be pursued and valued. These stories, authorised by management, are not necessarily adopted by

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ISSN 1356-2517 print/ISSN 1470-1294 online
© 2009 Taylor & Francis
DOI: 10.1080/13562510903186675
http://www.informaworld.com
academic staff as self-representative but they can be used as ‘cover’ stories (Connelly and Clandinin 1999), that is, stories to be used in ‘official’, public capacities.

This paper explores some of the ‘unofficial’, private stories of academic staff, including those which are not frequently shared in public spaces, and the ways in which they are created and perpetuated in the changing academic context. The authors first describe the changes which have influenced the academic profession as a background for the following discussion on the ways in which academic staff make sense of these emerging conditions. Data gathered during a world café seminar event, described later in the paper, was used to compose two vignettes which were shared by the participants as representative of their academic identities. These narratives are compared with the institutional stories of academic work and an analysis of the anomalies is presented. The paper concludes by addressing some of the concerns inherent in disregarding the multiple stories by which academic staff live.

Institutional and individual stories

Organisations are sites of multiple narratives which range from dominant public stories to private identity-related stories. Organisational members use these narratives to help them interpret their institutional context and their role. Perhaps the most evident of these stories are those which reflect the authorised or acceptable versions of the institution and its workers. They could be described as the rhetoric of the organisation, which represents the behaviours and objectives desired by institutional management. Through corporate communications, there is an attempt to manage meaning by providing heroes and metaphors designed to mobilise staff and to reinforce the interests of the organisation over those of other individuals and groups. Examples used by the institution where this study is located include stories of ‘gold-class academics’, that is staff who have achieved an international research profile and whose research returns a substantial profit to the institution. These public narratives are particularly necessary in times of significant cultural change, such as the re-imagining of academic work. Organisational members can draw on these stories and rhetoric as the basis for their repertoire of public stories. These ‘authorised’ stories, however, do not always reflect the expectations, previous experiences and values of academic staff (Churchman 2004; King 2007). Adopting them as self-representational would mean, for many academic staff, the jettisoning of values which are integral to their academic work.

When these corporate narratives are commonly espoused, they gain credibility and can cease to be questioned. Universities have certainly intensified their efforts to develop a credible, shared corporate story, through artefacts such as newsletters, intranets and corporate emails. This is largely a result of waning public funding and the need to market the universities’ commodities in order to stay financially solvent. Despite the dominance of the corporate narratives, they are not always used by academic staff to inform their interpretations of their workplace. This paper reveals some of the private stories that do not comply with the public stories provided by the institution, but address the members’ values and beliefs in regard to their institutional role. As Crites (1979, 126) notes, it is these private, or ‘real’, stories that most powerfully influence organisational members’ behaviour. Hence, when officially authorised versions of professional knowledge and practice are presented
by the institution as inevitable and incontestable, the stories of individuals tend to become hidden, or at least unrecognised by the institution.

**Academic profession**

The current shifts in academic institutions and profession have exacerbated the potential for conflict between these public and private stories, predominantly because the activities of tertiary institutions are increasingly removed from their histories. Dollery, Murray and Crase (2006) describe the new corporate style university, focusing on the new managerialistic language and governance practices. They comment on the replacement of values such as ‘collegiality’, ‘freedom of thought’ and ‘the pursuit of truth’, with ‘accountability’ and ‘efficiency’. Australian universities, they argue, have been transformed, through public policy, into quasi-commercial, competitive enterprises. This transformation is reflected in the language evident in the corporate communications of the organisation. Marketing metaphors have become an integral part of the academic vocabulary with catchphrases such as ‘lifelong learning’ designed to bring students back for further studies (Svensson and Wood 2007).

The shifts in the institutional vernacular has impacts on academic work. There are a number of studies which highlight the levels of dissatisfaction and stress among academic staff, together with other staffing concerns for academic institutions. With the declining attraction of the profession and the aging workforce, there will be a major shortfall of academic staff in the English-speaking world over the next decade which could make it more difficult for Australian universities to recruit staff (Hugo 2005). Australian federal government sponsored studies attribute this to academic salaries being relatively uncompetitive with comparable private sector salaries in Australia and some overseas academic salaries (Horsley, Martin and Woodburne 2005). It is likely that other factors have contributed in making academic careers less attractive. For example, there is ample evidence of increasing stress associated with the role (Gillespie et al. 2001) and reduced opportunities for creativity and autonomy (Bathmaker and Avis 2005). The increasing levels of reporting and accountability have shaken the foundations of academic work, as regulation and respect are not easily reconciled. Le Grand (2003) summarises the impacts of the recent shifts on academic staff:

> ...if people feel they are not trusted to provide a quality service and, moreover, are forced to undertake elaborate activities to prove they are in fact doing a good job (such as filling out forms, writing reports, and so forth), they can become either demoralised and demotivated or else motivated to behave in a more self-protective manner. (Le Grand 2003, 57)

Significant shifts in the tertiary sector in general are likely to continue to exacerbate these problems, rather than facilitate any resolution of them, as many of the more attractive features of a career in academia, such as the autonomy and opportunity to pursue ‘pet’ research projects, will be further reduced (Anderson 2006). In addition, the work of individual staff has been increasingly subjected to the audit culture which is evident in managerialistic environments. In an environment such as this, in which fundamental conditions of a historically sited profession are challenged, the
consistency of the lived experiences of academic staff with the public institutional stories should be explored.

Method
Data for this paper were gathered during a world café event held at an Australian university in November 2007, on the topic of ‘Academic identity (re)construction through learning new practices’. University staff were invited to attend this event to discuss the ways in which they constructed their workplace identities, particularly reflecting on the influences of the increasing controls which had recently been implemented to monitor and regulate work practices. Twenty-one people (19 females and two males) attended the event. Eighteen of them were from the faculty of education.

The world café process is conversational and as described on its website, ‘based on a set of integrated design principles that reveal a deeper living network pattern through which we co-evolve our collective future’. In terms of world café principles, a hospitable space was created and attendees were provided with meaningful questions to guide their discussions. They noted their ideas on shared, large sheets of paper and these notes provided the basis for the two vignettes constructed by the authors. The comments provided rich insights into the ways in which academic staff felt about both their role and the role of the institution. Gabriel (1999) provides an interesting summary of the use of narratives in studies such as this one:

A highly effective way of analyzing how identities are continuously constructed, how they become fragmented, and how they are reconstructed is through the study of stories in which individuals encode their identity, narratives which do not purport to merely report facts but poetically embellish facts for effect, allowing for a certain wish fulfilment. Stories do not present facts-as-information, but facts-as-experience, laden with symbolism and meaning, in which the storyteller expresses opinions, makes connections, displays feelings, and casts him/herself as a character in a meaningful narrative. (Gabriel 1999, 191)

Narratives thus created are not only conversational realities but are also constituents of ongoing and institutionalised patterns of societal conduct. They are sites of representation where subjectivities are constructed and contested. Through establishing valued outcomes and through endowing the narrative with actors and plots, narrators engage in moral evaluation. Through narration they also reiterate and transform culturally shared meanings, ideas, norms and values.

Vignettes of academic life
These vignettes represent two ‘identities’ which were dominant in the notes and the conversations at the world café event. The authors acknowledge that these are only two of many existing constructions of academic work and are not adopted by all academic staff at all times. Analysis of the data in this study revealed these two stories resonated with many of the participants. These vignettes are a composite of comments from both group conversation and participants’ notes which, together with the authors’ experiences provide stories that are not evident in ‘official’ interpretations of academic work. The vignettes reflect the ways in which the
academic staff make sense of their role and construct their workplace identities. These are their private stories.

Vignette 1 – Academic hope

This job is my idea of heaven. I can wear what I want, manage my own time, wander round the library, browsing through interesting books. I feel like I belong here. I’m more at home here than in any of my other jobs. People ‘get’ me here. There is a sense of emotional energy. People value what I think and say. I love the idea that learning is an integral part of what I do. I like doing work which is meaningful and working with students who thank me. I have a lot of hope and clarity about my role. I have an identity as a teacher which gives me an internal sense of wellness. The research aspect of the role is challenging but I am slowly pursuing it. I am not that interested in promotion and climbing the academic ladder as I have had my fill of competitive workplaces and continual striving. In my last job, I found myself waking at 4am, worried about deadlines and crises. Here, I focus more on what I enjoy doing.

I am aware that there have been, and will be more, changes but I hope that the uni doesn’t shift too far as this seems to be the last workplace with the freedom to allow you to act with some independence.

This story was predominantly shared by participants who had been employed in the institution for less than two years or who were employed on a casual basis, seeking full time employment. Many were doctoral students who were marginalised from the majority of corporate conversations, with some having only intermittent access to corporate communications. Many were unaware of corporate directives and major shifts in university policies. They were, for example, oblivious to a recent launch of a significant development in university teaching policies. They had no evidence from their management that they were valued employees, with their sense of being understood and valued predominantly derived from conversations with peers and students.

These participants were, however, a cohort who had considerable experience in other workplaces, often in senior roles. Their comments were made in the context of these experiences with the university comparing favourably as an institution which appeared to value their intellectual contribution and allow them the freedom to explore ideas. This idealistic view was juxtaposed with their concerns that this state is under threat but they appeared to see this as a distant event which could be avoided.

However, this story of academic hope did not resonate with other participants who had longer careers at the university. Their stories were more about trauma, complexity, and isolation brought about by the demands of the corporate university environment.

Vignette 2 – Academic loss and fear

No matter how hard I work and what I give up, I never get to the pinnacle of this job. I don’t want to buy into the overwhelming competitiveness that is the uni now but I just can’t seem to avoid it. I used to feel like an inspirational teacher and enjoyed the close contact with students. Now there are new criteria enforced by controls and audits, new conditions, larger class sizes, and I find that lots of things I enjoyed about teaching are no longer there. I engaged with research when it became evident that this was part of my job but now the whole notion of research has changed and I have to confine my research
to certain topics that attract funding or kudos. But these sources of funding and kudos change so I never feel that they are within my grasp. This type of research isn’t about things that matter to me or even interest me. I have jettisoned that long ago. So my work has become routine, mundane, procedural. This doesn’t fit with the idea of innovative, creative work or intellectual thinking. I feel really unclear about my role, what is expected of me or even what academic work should be.

I feel somewhat traumatised by this loss. This used to be a haven with opportunities for original, innovative work and the remnants of that must be protected. It is the last bastion for creativity and that is going in the face of the new managerialism. There is a new gold class of academic who meets the carefully designed, limited corporate measures of value and success.

So I dwell on the borders of the institution, staying out of the searchlight, flying below the radar. On the way to this institutional periphery, I lost the joy for working with students (too many of them), the research (too meaningless) and the collegial life (too disparate). In this isolated and alienated state, I no longer attempt to perpetuate an academic identity which differs from this gold standard, but I also no longer attempt to achieve it. I go through the academic motions and when the searchlight lands on me I have enough knowledge of the corporate norms to engage with the appropriate phrases. Then, as soon as I can, I scurry back to the academic shadows.

The disparity between these two stories is evident. While tellers of both stories inhabit the same world, they make sense of it in very different ways. Neither of these stories had been confirmed or denied by those in authority, yet both cohorts were convinced that their interpretations were ‘accurate’ representations of the current state of academic work and their institution.

The participants at the world café event shared varied ways of sustaining their stories. Those who shared Vignette 1 sustained their version of academic work through interactions with peers and students. There was evidence of like-minded groups of colleagues who shared their private stories and privileged these interpretations over the public stories of the institution. Generally, they were communities of staff who were removed from the corporate communications through either geographic, discipline or hierarchical barriers. Their relative isolation facilitated very little challenge to their story of academic hope.

For those who shared Vignette 2, isolation was sometimes described as a strategy. Isolation and anonymity were considered to be safe, as they reduced exposure to corporate measures. For others, isolation was described as a form of passive resistance to unwanted change. Academic staff saw themselves as withholding their intellectual labour from the university so it could not be coopted for purposes they did not value. They described this behaviour using the metaphors, such as ‘flying beneath the radar’. They argued that this was a strategic activity which connotes considerable skill, as knowing where not to go is a valuable, sometimes only, way of working in the university.

This notion of being invisible to those in authority was taken to another level by others who shared Vignette 2. Some contended that they did not always remain hidden and would openly resist and rebel when there were issues they regarded as important. While they were committed to ‘staying out of the limelight’, they asked, ‘Do we not want to be heard?’ They expressed awareness that, ‘sometimes the dangerous spaces are where decisions are made’. They aspired to ‘fearlessness’ and ‘standing up’ but, overall this thread was weak, with members expressing a sense that rebellion was both ineffective and had negative consequences. Passive resistance and
avoidance of situations in which one was coerced to engage with managerial imperatives was considered a safer option.

**Implications**

The disparity of the two vignettes highlights the ability of organisational members to make sense of similar organisational shifts in different ways. Sensemaking is conducive to privileging of information and the mythologising of histories, especially if workers are operating in relative isolation (Weick 1995). This isolation and the ability to be removed from the dominant organisational discourse was the common thread in both stories. One way of preserving an academic identity is to avoid excessive confrontation and challenge, which can be achieved by confining interactions to those who share that identity or maintaining isolated conditions.

Within this institution, the isolation appeared to be facilitated by the existence of multiple, dispersed campuses, relative autonomy of disciplines and the university’s extensive use of technology, such as emails and websites, in their communication practices. This, together with extensive travel commitments by academic staff, varied teaching times and the common practice of working away from the campus, have increasingly limited opportunities for personal contact between staff members. Isolation in academia is a recurring script, facilitating opportunities for private stories to be lived every day.

Another complicating factor is that academic staff are often not equipped with skills and resources to enact the public story. They have to learn the language and genre of new corporate stories and, with this, their past skills and stories become redundant. For some, it was a long process to compose the story they have lived by. This composition took both emotional and cognitive investment which may now have no return. For this reason, academic staff often choose to live by their private stories with tenacity and conviction. This is not to say that these stories are complete entities which are seldom reviewed, revised or contextualised. These private stories are multi-faceted with many plots in which the author can take on different roles and privilege different aspects of their story. With all this complexity, and acknowledging multiple influences, these stories must be seen as historically sited with the author’s rights as predominant. These rights are a way of preserving social and cultural capital around the discipline and the role they hold.

This capital is often hard won. Academic stories are constructed in a critical environment where members are scrutinised through a multiplicity of lenses. They are scrutinised as teachers by students, as workers by management/administration, as researchers by their peers and as a critical voice by the broader community. Academics are accustomed to defining and defending their stories, which can result in an overwhelming commitment or render these stories as fragile and susceptible. This fragility is exacerbated if the worker cannot find other people with symbols, phrases and stories which augment, validate or complement their emerging stories. Support of community members within the institution is a key to constructing narratives to work by. This support can come from any of multiple sources and doesn’t necessarily need to be authorised or validated by management. These communities can emerge and be sustained in multiple institutional locations but may not be valued in terms of new organisational directions. The academic staff members
may, therefore, need a public, cover story to enable their existence, even if only on the institutional periphery.

Both on an institutional and individual level, organisational stories are hierarchical. There are those that dominate the landscape and those that are marginalised. An organisation can be considered as a system of interconnected language communities existing within a larger language community (Mumby 1994). Mumby and Stohl (1991) assert that discourses (written or verbal) can structure systems of presence and absence within organisations, with control involving the compliance of others to a set of narratives and practices. The presence of narratives means that they become part of the ordinary, accepted practices of an organisation, with those that are dominant being seen as incontestable. They come to be experienced by organisation members as ‘objective’ and autonomous of the people who created them. In time these constructed meanings become ‘real’ and fixed and limit the possibility of acceptable alternative social realities (Mumby 1994). When one particular discourse, in this case the set of corporate narratives provided by the institution, is mandated as the only acceptable story, it calls into question the validity of other stories. In mandating one story as inevitable, the other organisational stories have no public voice.

In institutions such as universities, with multiple stakeholders, different interest groups can struggle to create a ‘meaning system’ which serves their interests and which can become the meta-narrative privileged over others, that is, a dominant discourse (Daniels, Spiker and Papa 1997, 254). Organisational narratives, or story telling, can be used to share understandings of organisational life and can be politically manipulated to reinforce ideologies and this manipulation has been a key strategy in introducing new practices to academic staff. But, to have this effect, the stories must have meaning for academic staff. In discounting the commitment that academic staff have to their private stories and assuming that the corporate stories will resonate with all staff, management often misread the lack of engagement with mandated change by academic staff.

The stories shared by participants in the world café indicated that the institutional change and broader shifts in the tertiary education environment were not rejected unconsidered. These corporate stories may have been able to coexist with the academic staff’s private stories if some synergies were recognised and accepted by management. In asking academic staff to relinquish the values which underpin their private stories, university management demonstrate either ignorance or dismissal of the key to enabling academic institutions to meet some of the disparate requirements of the contemporary environment. The presence of the corporate story does not necessarily have to be at the cost of the personal stories shared by academic staff, rather a recognition of these stories and the existence of safe institutional spaces to share them could facilitate a more diverse and collegial set of academic voices.

The result for the academic profession, as the space for their private stories is reduced, is the loss of plurality and limited opportunities for small collectives to create unique identities. There could become, in fact, only one story to live by in the institutional view. The illusion of removing choice neglects the agency of the staff and the depth of commitment to their view of the profession. Rather than an organisational web of stories making up a pluralised landscape, the institution is in
danger of ostensibly becoming one monolithic story that all workers can chant while living their ‘real’ academic life in the shadows.

Conclusion

Managers in tertiary institutions appear to have lost sight of plurality in favour of a focus on unifying practices in an attempt to promote cohesion, which may be a response to the problematic issues of conflict and politics endemic to pluralism. This conflict, however, can be manifested in different ways, such as withdrawal of intellectual labour and a lack of ownership of and commitment to their work practices. The lack of awareness of academic staff’s stories which do not entirely conform with corporate directives does not result in their demise, but rather their manifestation in subversive forms. Creativity could be fostered through promoting spaces where the multiple stories can resonate, grow and sustain identities. They can be communal sites of resistance, collegiality, sustenance and innovation. Or, they can be symbolic repositories of organisational histories. Or, they can be the self-representation of moral, theoretical and practical positions. Within these spaces, validation of academic staff’s private stories facilitates a broader, more diverse engagement with the institution and academic work.

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