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Perpetual Construction of Academic Identity in Higher Education (0021)

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In the last ten years unprecedented changes have occurred in all aspects of higher education, and this has posed several challenges to the construction of academic identity. The twofold purpose of this research was: to gain a greater understanding of the construction of academic identity within higher education and to generate a logical, systematic, explanatory theory of academic identity construction. A classical, grounded theory approach was used and it proposes that when academics begin to create space and time for themselves they experience a 3-stage process on their road towards academic identity construction. The 3-stages involves a predisposed identity stage, deconstructing identity and reconstructing academic identity. The theory of 'Perpetual Construction of Academic Identity in Higher Education' demonstrates that space and time within higher education are critically important in providing academics with the ability to realise their full potential and to become who they want to become.

The fundamental purpose of higher education has changed; as new higher level institutions have become more accountable and the expectation of effectiveness and cost efficiency has increased. Academics within higher education may have become confused about their position as the pressure on academic work has intensified; and academics are now expected to engage in a wider range of activities within an increasingly competitive climate. Currently academics are now expected to be actively involved in research, to acquire external funding and to be proactive in publishing within peer-reviewed, internationally recognised journals and in presenting at national and international conferences. For upward promotion within the ranks of the university structures, academics must satisfy all of the expectations made of them.

Under the current oppressive conditions, attempts to construct academic identity are unlikely to succeed and any attempt to encourage academics to refocus their energies in teaching and learning will be lost if academics are not willing to change or, if they do not see the value of teaching and learning for career progression or permanency within the organisation, particularly, if their higher level institution fails to support them in the process. Academics often continue with the same agenda throughout their academic careers due to their concerns about the support and encouragement from esteemed colleagues and students, thus, they are often involved in a constant attempt to maintain the status quo. This argument has been supported by several studies which have shown that academics often resent and resist change and undermine it from occurring in many different ways (Trowler 1998; Henkel 2000).

When space and time are provided academics are allowed to think about the possible contributions they could make rather than being so overwhelmed by trying to accomplish tasks that excellence is

achieved only rarely, in this way, fear and anxiety can be transformed into opportunities in which new possibilities may occur. Within higher education, it is increasingly difficult for academics to find space as their energy has become over consumed due to the high level of speed at which higher education is operating. The literature on learning spaces and higher education focuses predominantly on creating a better learning climate for the student and more physical learning spaces within the university. (Edwards 2000). Universities need to create learning spaces that allow for the possibility of multiple, contrasting experiences (Jamieson 2003) in spaces which are 'softer, less rigid, more open to the indeterminableness of experience' (p.120) and where the character of the space is formed by the 'shape and identity of the relationships created within it' (Ceppi and Zini, 1998, p. 24). Thus, what is needed is the creation of spaces within the university in which learning is encouraged to occur; however, the idea of a learning space encompasses more than just a physical space and must encourage academics to think and be reflective about their position within higher education, however, 'currently there seems to a lack of realisation that we are losing ground because we are losing space' (Savin Baden 2008, p.2). Thus, Savin Baden (2008) argues that the concept of learning spaces within higher education relates to the idea that various forms of space exist within the academics' world in which opportunities to become self reflective of one's position within higher education naturally occurs; learning spaces are places where engagement occurs and inchoate ideas come together as the academic is suspended from the pressures of everyday life. As well as lack of space academics in higher education are continually trying to negotiate time and thus the creation of learning space must also be accompanied with the creation of time.

Profound changes have occurred, in all spheres of modern life as the nature of clock time has accelerated and become more intense (Eriksen, 2001; Hassard, 2002; Hassan, 2003), this fast pace of being and clock-watching has permeated throughout higher education. Thus, for academics, the ability to create learning spaces is not easy and the idea of slowing down their work pace may seem unrealistic to most lecturers who work in higher education. Academics often associate speed with decisiveness and efficiency, in contrast, slowing down or slow time is viewed as being lazy or inefficient. For most academics, the fact that there is less and less time within higher education to accomplish the requisite tasks is considered a general constraint. The future for academics is becoming less predictable, more uncertain and long term planning is rarely achieved due to frantic focusing on the here and now.

This theory of 'perpetual Construction of Academic Identity in Higher Education' has identified a powerful basic social process. The main concern for the academic within higher education is the continually changing nature of the academy and the increased diversity and expectations of higher level organisations on their understanding of the role of the academic. Therefore the construction of academic identity can be described as an ever-changing and dynamic concept. This substantive grounded theory has illuminated how academic identity is constructed within the realm of higher education and has shown it to be a three staged process, namely Predisposed academic identity, deconstructing academic identity and reconstructing academic identity, and has indicated that this

construction needs to be a perpetual process where academics must learn to create space and time for themselves in order to deconstruct and reconstruct their identity throughout their academic career. It is the proposal of this grounded theory that the way that academics learn to discover their potential within the environment in which they work, is through the development and sustainability of possibility portals that affords them sufficient space and time to re-think and rediscover themselves. Therefore the development and sustainability of possibility portals be they formal or not, primarily acts as a conduit for the creation of space and time.

This presentation aims at discussing the findings that have been generated following a PhD degree using a grounded theory approach.

Key words- learning space, slow time, possibility portals

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