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A crisis of identity – on becoming scholars of teaching and learning (0200)

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Shulman encourages “scholars of courage and talent” to “cut against the grain” and pursue the scholarship of teaching. While mentioning the profound impact serious scholars in their disciplines can have through their contribution in this area, he also adds a warning: “In order to succeed with this strategy in our era it is probably necessary to be not just very good but distinctively excellent in one’s unconventional (in this case, scholarship of teaching) inquiries and career. “

It is this warning that is of interest here. With growing numbers of academics choosing to pursue the scholarship of teaching, we need to understand what this warning pertains to. This paper will explore this question from the perspective of eight emerging scholars of teaching at a medium sized, research-led university in South Africa. The concepts of communities of practice, discourse and academic tribes and territories will be used to explain the findings.

A crisis of identity - on becoming scholars of teaching and learning

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Lee Shulman encourages “scholars of courage and talent” to “cut against the grain” and pursue the scholarship of teaching. Serious scholars in their disciplines, he tells us, can have a profound impact through their contribution in this area. He adds a warning though: “to succeed with this strategy in our era it is probably necessary to be not just very good but distinctively excellent in one’s unconventional (in this case, scholarship of teaching) inquiries and career”.

It is this warning that is of interest here. With growing numbers of academics choosing to pursue the scholarship of teaching, we need to understand what the risks associated with such a choice are.

The literature identifies two clear threats to the success of emerging scholars who have committed to this “unconventional” journey. These are the reward and recognition of scholarly outputs in this area, and accessing the discourse and methodologies of the field. Wankat et al. (2002) note that the bar for promotions based on the scholarship of teaching and learning appears to be significantly higher than it is for academics following a more conventional research approach. McKinney (2006) refers to “narrow views” of scholarship sometimes held by those in power. Where the scholarship of teaching is seen as

less important, she claims, it could translate into social isolation for those academics choosing to pursue it.

Although references to the issue of reward and recognition have received more mention in the literature, accessing and mastering the methodologies and discourse of this field is no less problematic. The difficulties experienced by academics from non-social science backgrounds have been traced to the social science roots of the scholarship of teaching and learning (Richlin, 2001; Wankat et. al., 2002) while Stierer and Antoniou (2004) highlight the absence of “published texts that provide specific discussion or guidance on methodologies for pedagogic research in higher education”.

This study set out to explore Shulman’s warning, in the light of the documented challenges, from the perspective of eight emerging scholars of teaching at a medium sized, research-led university in South Africa.

The criteria for selection of participants were drawn from Richlin’s (2001) description of “scholarly teaching”. According to this description, scholarly teachers use relevant literature and systematic observation to make sense of the teaching and learning environment and inform their teaching choices. In addition, they attempt to disseminate their findings via appropriate media. Using these aspects as basis, most of the *emerging scholars* in this sample were selected from a pool of academics who had received grants for research into their teaching from the university’s Fund for Innovation and Research into Teaching and Learning.

The data was collected by conducting semi-structured interviews which were audio-taped, transcribed and coded, using a provisional start list as described by Miles and Huberman (1994). The sample included three participants from Health Science, three from Economic and Management Science and two from Natural Science.

The findings of this study support existing literature in identifying access to the discourse as well as reward and recognition issues as key problem areas associated with the process of becoming a scholar of teaching. What is interesting, however, is the notion of identity as an additional obstacle. This possibly provides a new perspective. Emerging scholars have to find their way in the unknown landscape of scholarly work on teaching and learning; they also have to find a way to assert their position in a culture of restrictive performance expectations and, finally, they have to negotiate uncomfortable identity changes resulting from their growth as scholar in this field.

We learn from the work of Gee (1999) that we are recognised by our discourse with a capital “D”. To enact a particular sort of socially recognizable identity we need to be familiar with the accepted “ways of combining and integrating language, actions, interactions, ways of thinking, believing, valuing, and using various symbols, tools and objects [in the right places and at the right times]”.

Becher and Trowler (2001) argue that publication is not an end to academics, but a means to an end, namely recognition. This, however, is complicated by the fact that some areas of research, “because of their particular constellation of properties [because they do not sufficiently meet the favoured criteria: hardness, purity and an urban research style], seem doomed to a place far down the pecking order”.

Wenger (1998) explains that entering a new community of practice can be problematic if “we do not understand the subtleties of the enterprise as the community has defined it” or if “we lack the shared references that the participants use”. And since “membership in a community of practice translates into an identity as a form of competence” this has an impact on newcomers’ perceptions of their own identity. This crossing of community boundaries is especially difficult when the two communities are defined in opposition to each other, where “membership in one community implies marginalization in another”.

Using the work of Gee (1999), Wenger (1998) and Becher and Trowler (2001), it will be argued that emerging scholars in this study experienced, amongst others, a crisis of identity. Unfamiliarity with the teaching discourse in the field marks them as strangers in the SoTL community. In addition, work in a field very low down the pecking order could have dire consequences for their credibility (and by implication recognisability) in the disciplinary community. As a result, they are not recognized by their home community or by the new community. In addition, they no longer recognize themselves as competent in either community.

This study calls to attention the subtle interplay of professional identity and “regimes of competence” (Gee, 1999) and how this materializes into a challenge along the journey towards the scholarship of teaching undertaken by an important group of academics. The challenge higher education faces, if we want to promote and effectively support work in this area, is to form a clear understanding of the risks and difficulties associated with choosing a career in this field.

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