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The good academic - revitalizing the discourse of transformation in higher education (0071)

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What is a good academic and through what kind of language can such an ideal be understood, shared and explored? This discussion in Higher Education can be viewed as evolving around two opposed and mutually exclusive discourses focusing on either Bildung, authenticity and personal growth (Klafki 2005; Barnett 2007; Bonnett 1994) or what might be called competence-based education (Biggs & Tang 2007; Dee Fink. 2003). The tension between these discourses implicitly shapes the ongoing conversation on the question of what a good academic is and can be. Where theories on explicit learning goals and taxonomies for learning unintentionally might reduce the complexity of actual learning processes and risk stifling the voice of the particular student, theories on Bildung and existential development on the other hand risk muffling the voice of concrete pedagogical practice through vague and metaphysical concepts of “being” and “the matter itself” (“die Sachen Selbst”) (for a critique see Jensen & Bengtsen 2011; Bengtsen 2011). We argue that both discourses tend to become more and more removed from what actually happens at a daily basis in lecture halls, teacher offices and in study groups at universities across the globe. The question that arises is: How can we engage university teachers and students in the discussion of what makes a good academic and in ways that activate their abundant situated knowledge as a resource for reshaping the conceptual space of transformation in Higher Education?

Our empirical data consists of 48 semi-structured interviews with Master’s dissertation supervisors and students from our respective PhD theses (completed and on-going). We have focused on Master’s dissertation supervisors because they can be viewed as key bearers of academic culture: The Master’s dissertation marks the endpoint of an academic degree and therefore the discussion of what constitutes a good academic is particularly apparent when engaging with the Master’s dissertation as research field. At the same time, The Master’s dissertation as a research focus offers a multitude of context in the form of specific disciplinary topics, genres and practices as well as personal factors and different conceptualizations of the function of the Master’s dissertations in Higher Education. Our analytical framework consists of linguistic and phenomenological theories on metaphors, narratives and style (Lakoff & Johnson 2003; Lakoff & Johnson 1999; Johnstone 2000; Johnstone 1996; Manen 2002; Manen 1990) as we in our work have paid special attention to language, mythologies and worldviews, which define, enact and conjure the idea of the Master’s dissertation as an arena and a training ground for academic identity and formation. We show how university teachers use a sensitive, vibrant and nuanced language for university practice and student identity and argue that this language escapes the existing categories offered by theoretical discourses used to describe pedagogical challenges in higher education. Our findings indicate that the concept of *the good academic* cannot be fully understood in a purely conceptual manner or with abstract categories, as the specific disciplinary fields, personal factors and concrete situations infuse and shape the ways one can become a good academic.

We argue that the rich and abundant character of pedagogical practice in higher education cannot be grasped solely by a discourse on Bildung or competence-based education, and a consequence of insisting

on these current frameworks for the continuing discussion of developing Higher Education is that it revolves around itself, leaving very little room to discover and engage with new ideas. Instead we underline the importance of methodological approaches that at the same time derives data from the actual participants in academic culture and are open to other theoretical frameworks than those which shape the current landscape in research in Higher Education. The messy and contextualized character of university practice must be met by a conceptual language which heeds an understanding of higher education as an embodied and personal arena, for students as well as for teachers. No external system, institution, legislation or rule book can relieve the university teacher from the responsibility to internalize, enact and project an ideal of the good academic in their dealings and dialogues with students.

Therefore we suggest that in order to create a space for transformation of teacher and student experiences in Higher Education there is a need for recharging this discussion by moving away from a meta-discourse depleted from knowledge and language from disciplinary fields, personal factors and situational awareness in favor of a perspective, that views contextual circumstances as a resource instead of a hindrance.

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