The teaching-only academic role in research intensive universities: a case of spoiled identity?

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Abstract
Teaching in higher education is increasingly coming under public scrutiny. As a response to this, and partly because of research specialisation arising out of the Research Excellence Framework (formerly the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) assessment), the number of academics on teaching-only contracts is increasing. This paper presents a study on how teaching-only academics within Engineering, Mathematics and Computing disciplinary areas at a research intensive institution are conceptualising their academic identities. To ensure the confidentiality of the research participants, pseudonyms have been used for both the research participants and the research intensive institution. Findings from this study appear to confirm that the teaching-only academic identity is the wrong sort of identity to have in a research intensive institution.

Keywords
academic identity, teaching-only academic, spoiled identity, research-intensive institutions

1. Introduction
It is widely acknowledged that in research intensive universities, research is held in higher regard compared to teaching. For instance, a UK government white paper on the future of higher education (Department for Education and Skills (DfES), 2003:19) noted that teaching has long been the poor relation in higher education, with promotion for academics being based largely on research excellence, rather than teaching ability. This has been further exacerbated by the advent of the research assessment exercise (RAE), an academic peer research quality assessment undertaken on behalf of the UK higher education funding councils (HEFCE, 2012), which has inadvertently led to a market for research-active academics at the expense of teaching-focused, non-research-active academics (Harley, 2002).
The objective of this study was to investigate and document how teaching-only academics in research intensive universities in England make sense of their status in comparison to that of research-active academics. The underlying theoretical framework for this study was the concept of academic identity. The study sought to understand how teaching-only academics make sense of their academic identities and how they reconstruct these identities and adapt themselves to teaching in a research-intensive environment. The notion of “second class citizenship” within academia was also explored. This was done through a case study of teaching-only academics working within the disciplines of Mathematics, Computing and Engineering at the pseudonymous University of Excellent Research.

2. Overview of Previous Work on Academic Identity
Several researchers have used identity to explore academic work conditions, including Archer (2008), Fitzmaurice (2011), Clegg (2008) and Skelton (2012). Both Archer and Fitzmaurice explored the nature and formation of contemporary academic identities by exploring the perceptions of early-career-stage academics. Archer observed that the field of higher education, like any other professional field, is in a state of perpetual change and this places significant challenges on people working within the field, especially those entering the academic profession for the first time. Archer reported that early stage academics are under pressure to meet institutional targets, both in their research and teaching. Fitzmaurice observed that peer pressure from fellow early-career stage academics in similar positions in other institutions and countries also played an important part in motivating this group to partake in research. Consequently, it can be surmised that participating in research activities is an important part in the identity of early stage academics.

Clegg also observed that academic identities are in a state of constant flux, being actively shaped and re-shaped in response to the changes taking place in higher education and its external environment. However, her study revealed that academics did not just respond passively to the performative institutional pressures placed on them. Rather, academics actively contributed to the formulation of their own identities, with the result that the emerging identities are as much a result of institutional influences as they are a result of personal agency.

Unlike the other three studies, Skelton’s work focused primarily on academic identities within research-led institutions. Skelton’s study revealed that teaching had a low status, at least in the research-led institution studied. As one study participant said (Skelton, 2012:14): “it’s the wrong identity, it’s not really what I want to do ... I don’t want to be a low status person in a research department.” The purpose of the study that I report in this paper was also to establish whether this was the case in the institution under study.

3. Study Methodology
I have adopted an ethnographic approach for this study. Punch (2009) defines ethnography as a means of describing a culture and understanding a way of life from the point of view of
the participants. Ethnographic studies are usually conducted by a researcher who is external to the community being studied. However, in my case, by virtue of being a member of the community under study, I was both a participant and an observer. This type of ethnography where the researcher is an active participant within the community under study is termed self-ethnography (Alvesson, 2003).

As regards this study, I sought to comply with the ethical guidelines for educational research issued by the British Educational Research Association (2011). I have also sought to safeguard the study participants’ personal privacy and the confidentiality of their personal data by using pseudonyms instead of their actual names. I have also replaced the identity of the university with an appropriate pseudonym. Such a measure, though not fool-proof, will make it significantly more difficult for non-participants to identify with certainty any of the participants.

4. Research Findings and Discussion

At the time of this study there were seven teaching-only academics working in Mathematics, Computing and Engineering, including myself. TOA2, TOA3 and TOA6 were Mathematics academics, whilst TOA5 and TOA8 were Engineering academics.TOA4 taught in Computing whilst TOA1 taught in both Computing and Engineering. The last academic, TOA7, had responsibility for the virtual learning environment within Mathematics, Engineering and Computing, and also delivered work-based modules across all the three academic disciplines. All the academics were qualified to PhD level, with the exception of TOA3 and TOA7, who both held Master level qualifications.

A first step of this work was to explore how the academics got into their present roles. Sorcinelli (1986) observes that the process of an individual entering an academic career is characterised by the individual making two career decision points. The first relates to discipline choice, and this is often decided during undergraduate study. The second relates to the decision to enter an academic career. The decision to pursue an academic career is often made during graduate studies. With regard to the UK, a 2005 study found that 40% of all research students aspire to an academic career (Metcalf et al., 2005), and the main reasons for this are a desire to do research and to set one’s own research agenda. According to Metcalf et al, 63% of the research students who intended to go into an academic career had a strong interest in research and only 30 per cent expressed a strong interest in teaching.

All the teaching-only academics in this study, with the exception of TOA1, TOA3 and TOA7, entered their current roles following a relatively short postdoctoral research career after graduation. The only other notable exception is TOA4 who progressed into the current role straight from her PhD position. TOA1 served as a practising engineer for 8 years before moving into an academic position with another university. He moved into the current role after completing a PhD. TOA3 worked as a high school teacher following graduation, and then as a Mathematics teacher trainer on a postgraduate certificate in teaching (PGCE) programme before moving into her current role where she is involved with teaching first year Mathematics courses in Engineering. TOA7 worked for several
years as a further education lecturer before taking up a position as an e-learning coordinator at a university. He then moved to the current university to take up a temporary position as an academic developer before being offered his current role within e where he is responsible for the quality of the virtual learning environment within the Engineering, Mathematics and Computing disciplinary areas. TOA7's increasingly diverse role is also characteristic of the increasingly blurred boundaries between the identities and roles of professional services staff and academic staff in higher education (Whitchurch, 2008).

None of the teaching-only academics expressed that they had taken on the job as a first choice. For some, it was a job role that came along when they needed a job. For instance, TOA3 and TOA7 took on the job following family relocations. TOA5 and TOA6 entered the role following the end of their research contracts in other universities. For TOA4, it was a case of drifting into a permanent, more secure job role after having worked in the same role on a part-time basis during her PhD studies within the university. However, all the academics expressed an interest in teaching. TOA1 had worked for several years in a teaching-intensive university prior to embarking on his PhD. The job was therefore a continuation of the work he was already engaged in.

A key aspect in exploring the identity of these academics was to investigate how the academics position themselves to the outside world. This was done through an analysis of their profiles on the university website. All the academics, with the exception of TOA3, had written a brief profile of their research and teaching activities. A look at the academics’ website profiles revealed that the individual academic’s research profile was a key feature in all but one of the academics' websites. All the academics expressed the desire to remain engaged with research, which they saw as part and parcel of their identity as academics. The teaching-only academics also expressed regret that their role left them with little or no time to do research. This was because of the heavy teaching load. They felt that they were missing out on research and the comments by TOA8 best sum up the position of the academics: “I embarked on a PhD because I wanted to do research. I miss research, I miss the opportunity to do research, I don’t want to lose expertise in my research area, another one or two years will make me lose touch.”

Research was also important to one of the non PhD holders, TOA3. In his case, however, the research focussed on teaching and learning, and therefore had a direct bearing on his work. The other non PhD holder, TOA7, concentrated exclusively on teaching, and did not carry out any research. TOA7 summed up her position with regard to research as: “I am a teacher. That is what I was employed to do, and that is what I do – teach.”

Some academics, notably TOA1 and TOA2, are increasingly taking their roles as discipline-based teaching specialists as a serious career path. Both are actively engaged in funded teaching and learning research, and TOA2 has been seconded to the Academic Services department where he is teaching for one day a week on academic development modules as well as collaborating on funded projects in academic development. In TOA2’s view, securing grant funding is critical to the acceptance of teaching-only academics as bona fide academics.
However, other teaching-only academics see their teaching-only roles as pathways to the traditional research and teaching roles. They therefore see engagement in discipline-specific research as critical to their career objectives. To further their objectives, these academics ensure that they remain engaged with the research activities within their disciplines. This includes attending discipline-based research seminars, attending and presenting in these research seminars and external conferences, and publishing in research journals.

Another important aspect of the study was to establish how the teaching-only academics perceived their roles relative to that of research and teaching academics. This confirmed that teaching was a low status academic identity in research intensive institutions as observed by Skelton (2012). For instance, both TOA3 and TOA4 expressed reservations about the differential treatment accorded to teaching-only academics and research and teaching academics. Also, commenting on the status of teaching-only academics, TOA1 observed: “We are lecturers, but not the real thing, hence the label ‘education and scholarship.’”

Another sticking point is the unintended role of the teaching-only academic job family to academics in the research and teaching job family. The teaching-only academic job family is increasingly being mentioned by senior management as a potential destination for research and teaching academics who consistently fail to meet their research targets. As a consequence of this, the job role is now being viewed as a destination for underperforming academics.

5. Concluding Remarks

The findings from this study suggest that the teaching-only academic role is perceived by those holding the role as a “second class” academic role. This perception also appears to be shared by senior management, who increasingly mention it as a possible destination for underperforming research and teaching academics. Hence, within research intensive institutions, the teaching-only academic role appears to be assuming the status of a “spoiled identity” – i.e. the wrong sort of identity to have within a social setting according to Goffman (1963).

6. References


