

Shifting selves: Constructing and negotiating academic identities

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Abstract

This study set out to explore how academics construct and negotiate their identities within the world of the academe. Identity construction involves different forms of community participation and identification. Utilising the research methodology of narrative inquiry, this article explores how academics came to see themselves across those communities which were of primary importance to them in the formation of their identities. Through the construction of narratives of experience, their lived and told stories emphasised the diversity of their identities that were negotiated with others within personal, historical and situational contexts. The article will conclude by recognising that the study of academics' lives from their perspective, in which they actively and socially develop their identities, not only provides a lens through which they can be understood as shifting constructions of identity, but allows them to rethink who they are and have become and what influence power relations have had in promoting or negating their sense of academic self.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND CONTEXT

The Education White paper 3 on Higher Education of 1997 earmarked the policy transformation of the higher education system in South Africa. The principal objective of this document was to transform the higher education system to become 'a key allocator of life chances as an important vehicle for achieving equity in the distribution of opportunity and achievement among South African citizens' (Education White Paper 3 1997). The South African higher education system in the post apartheid period is under considerable pressure to provide access and quality education to *all* the people of the country. To this end, most higher education institutions in South Africa have changed their admission and recruitment policies in an attempt to redress the imbalances caused by the apartheid education system. However, this move to attain equality in quantitative terms has not yet translated into critical reviews of second order changes. To a large extent, the fact that transformation in higher education is leaping outwards to fulfil the criteria set by international competitiveness and related efficiency criteria, bypassing crucial contextual (internal) yardsticks such as promotion of diversity can be attributed equally to the globalisation pressures and the amnesic fantasy that these issues will disappear on their own. It can also be attributed to deeper factors inherent in the nature of the higher education institution

itself, especially its resistance to change and modernisation (Haley 2002). How then is the South African higher education sector being reconfigured to tackle this issue? Are there any emerging trends forcing the higher education system out of its 'closet', 'archives', 'comfort zones'?

Many former white Afrikaans speaking universities in South Africa have undergone cosmetic modifications in attempting to address first order changes. First, a drastic change in the student population due to the change in the medium of instruction from exclusively Afrikaans to a policy of dual medium instruction, Afrikaans and English. Second, a change in the lecturer composition, motivated in large part by the Department of Education in terms of retracting subsidies if transformation failed to occur. Little if any second order changes have been instituted at these universities. Many black academics have been recruited to these universities to increase numbers so that the institution looks good in terms of the transformatory agenda. However, the University as an all encompassing body itself, comprises different 'communities' the nature of which and how they are produced directly influences the location and identities of academics (Henkel 2000; Trowler and Knight 2000). Today's academic workplace is characterised by fragmentation. The increased differentials between individuals in terms of status and autonomy has had a profound effect on the participation of academics and on their sense of professional identity (Nixon 1996) and the underlying structures and ideologies in communities of practice that can work to the disadvantage of academics. This conveys a sense that being an academic is no longer straightforward, if we consider the extent to which they have access to, or can cross boundaries to, other communities of practice within and beyond higher education. Accordingly, this study asks how do academics construct and negotiate their identities within the world of the academe.

This article will consider how academic identity construction involves different forms of community participation and identification. The article draws on a study that involved three academics who explored how they came to see themselves across those communities which were of primary importance to them in the formation of their identities. Through self-reflection and the construction of narratives of experience, their lived and told stories emphasised the diversity of their identities that were negotiated with others within personal, historical and situational contexts. The research addresses the diversity of their professional lives and the assertion that there is more than one way to construct an academic self.

The argument is presented as follows. I begin by locating this study in the literature. A conceptual framework on organisational culture and climate is then presented. I then describe the context and sample and the research methodology that was implemented. The narratives of these three academics are subsequently presented. I conclude with an analysis and discussion of findings and examine ways in which Universities have elected or omitted to adopt certain strategies with the 'opening' of racially exclusive Universities in South Africa.

LOCATING THE ACADEMIC IN THE WORLD OF THE ACADEME

Higher education comprises several communities of practice in which academics participate as members on a number of different levels (Trowler and Knight 2004; Malcolm and Zukas 2000). It is within these communities that ‘culture is both enacted and constructed and where personal identity coalesces, is shaped and reshaped’ (2004, 30). Academics of today not only move in multiple timeframes (Barnett 2009) but also have access to and can cross boundaries into other communities of practice within and beyond higher education. Wenger (1998, 163) thus argues that academic identity is a ‘nexus of multi membership’ in that

identity combines multiple forms of membership through a process of reconciliation across boundaries of practice.

It thus becomes apparent that identities of today’s academics do not nestle solely within the confines of the university but that they straddle across various communities of practice that are becoming increasingly more porous.

Academic identity and communities of practice

A review of the voluminous literature reveals that there are different communities of practice that influence the formation of academic identities (Kogan 2000; James 2005). Kogan (2000) distinguishes between two types of communities that directly influence the formation of academic identity, namely, internal academic communities (departmental, faculty); external academic communities that encompass widening circles first within the academe (institutional), then outside it (societal) and then to the wider world.

The inner workings of the academe

Within the domain of inner workings of the academe, Henkel (2000) delineates three distinct but interconnected concepts of academic identities. First, she argues that the academic is a ‘distinctive individual’ who is constituted of a unique history, a chosen moral and conceptual framework and is identified within a defined community or institution by the goods that she has achieved. It is within this space that identities are seen as a ‘learning trajectory’ (James 2005, 7) that ‘. . . incorporates the past and the future in the very process of negotiating the present’ (Wenger 1998, 74). This form of identity is personal, reflecting the life history of the academic and is inextricably interwoven into the very essence of being of the academic; who you are, your commitments and sets of values. It is within this frame of reference that identities are seen as ever changing and evolutionary. It consists of a set of separate and broad identities, attitudes, knowledge and practices (Henkel 2000) and can also be influenced by other life domains (Stapleton 2001) from which academics draw their experiences.

Second, the academic is an ‘embedded individual’ (Henkel 2000). She is a member of communities and institutions defined by their own languages, conceptual

structures, histories, traditions, myths, values, practices and achieved goods. The individual in this context fulfils her role as an academic that is strongly determined by the norms of the communities and institutions she inhabits. These experiences are social, reflecting the contexts in which academics live. Maclure (1993, 314) argues that this process of identity construction involves ‘a self reflexive endeavour’ that is inclusive of a ‘. . . network of personal concerns, values and aspirations against which events are judged and decisions are made’. This claim is supported by Buch (1999, 52) who comments:

. . . as [our] lives unfold new situations and contexts are interpreted understood and subjectively incorporated as experiences. Eventually the production and transformation of identities can be seen as a result of this lived process.

And third, the academic is a ‘professional individual’, which is a combination of both individual and social identities. Tension arises as the academic tries to establish a professional sense of self, since this process unfolds within the social context of the institution, where the academic finds herself anchored. However, the constituents of professionalism are often incongruent with the kind of behavioural directives and prescriptive frames of the institution (Henkel 2000).

The outer workings of the academe

How are academic identities influenced by the widening circles first within the academe and then outside it? Kogan (2000, 211) argues that within the university there are collegial clusters, increasingly yielding power to the wider university concerns, initiatives and control. The individual academic as Henkel (2000) notes, increasingly becomes dependent on the institution for her place within the system. Academics enter the academe with a ‘biographical and cultural knapsack’. When they enter an occupational role, their experiences are ‘. . . radically influenced by the things they bring with them to the university and by factors inherent in the institutional context’ (Robinson et al., 12). Within this context, identity becomes a constant social negotiation that is understood through the practices with which academics engage. Consequently, as argued by Wenger (1998), members’ experiences of different communities of practice create possibilities for identities to be both productive and conflictual. Thus identity is not merely defined by the individual, but by the way in which the individual is perceived as being a full member of a community.

In these ways James (2005) argues that the inner workings of the academe can affect both aspects of academic community participation and identity construction and impact on the values of academic autonomy and the freedom to move across boundaries of practice. As academics move from one community of practice to another, they learn to take on different identities. If however, the fluidity of identities is not recognised by individuals within a particular community of practice, then these academics may find it increasingly difficult to sustain full membership. They may even need to find a new location with which they have a better sense of ‘identity coherence’ (Pacheter 2003, 75). Thus Kogan (2000) notes,

Individual identity, its institutional and subject settings and the world outside the university can be seen as separate but linked entities, giving each other support not by the assumed sharing of values implied by community but through negotiation and exchange.

Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework for this study is grounded in the literature on organisational culture and climate as well as the literature on the recruitment and retention of faculty members. The conceptual framework consists of three overarching sets of benefits – tangible, intangible, and non-work-related – that accrue to faculty members by virtue of their decisions to stay or to leave (Matier 1990; 1991).

Drawing on the work of March and Simon (1958) and Flowers and Hughes (1973), Matier (1990) developed a four-part framework that was indicative of the elements involved in an individual’s decisions to remain at or to leave and employment situation. This study focuses on the second and third of Matier’s major elements: the perceived desirability of moving and the inducements or enticements that may have been influential in a faculty member’s decision to accept a position with the institution at which he or she was, at the time of participation in the study, employed. Three types of benefits and their corresponding variables are identified in the Table 1.

Table 1: Perceived benefits and inducement variables

Intangible	Tangible	Non-Work Related
Reputation of institution	Promotion or added responsibilities	Consulting opportunities
Reputation of department	Cash salary	Spouse career opportunities
Reputation of associates	Benefit package	School situation of children
Congeniality of associates	Income potential	Geographic considerations
Rapport with department leaders	Teaching and research load	Climate of region
Career advancement opportunities	Research funding	Cultural, recreational, and social opportunities
Teaching and assignment opportunities	Library facilities	Housing costs
Research opportunities	Lab and research facilities	Family living locally
Loyalty to the institution	Office facilities	Local network of friends
Loyalty to department or program	Secretarial support	
Influence in department	Sabbatical, leave, travel	
Influence in institution	Reduced tuition for family	

Source: Adapted form Matier (1990; 1991)

Matier (1990) distinguishes between the tangible and intangible benefits of the position. The tangible benefits were those that could be tangibly quantified, including ‘wages, facilities, work rules, and fringe benefits’ while the intangible benefits were those that were less easily quantifiable such as ‘personal and institutional reputation, autonomy, influence and sense of belonging’ (1990, 42). Matier operationalised the external environmental factors in terms of non-work related variables. These he

framed in terms of ‘quality of life, family, friendships, and non-job-related financial considerations’ (1990, 42).

RESEARCH STRATEGY

This study sought to examine those communities in which academics, all of whom worked in the same department at a Faculty of Education, constructed and reflected upon their identities, their values and the knowledge-base of their work (James 2003) as they moved ‘. . . into, out of, and through communities of practice, continually transforming identities, understanding and world views’ (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1995, 469).

The study was qualitative in nature and utilized the social constructivist approach. The methodology involved narrative inquiry (Clandinin and Connelly 2000). Narrative inquiry is the process of gathering information for the purpose of research through storytelling. The researcher then writes a narrative of the experience. Connelly and Clandinin (1990, 7) note that, ‘Humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and collectively, lead storied lives. Thus, the study of narrative is the study of the ways humans experience the world.’ In other words, people’s lives consist of stories. Narrative inquiry was used in this study to explore how academics’ experiences formed the basis for their professional identity as well as to understand their experiences as lived and told stories.

The use of this methodology allowed the participants of this research study to tell the stories of their life experiences based on their unique and personal contexts, situatedness, meanings, interpretations and language of expression (Casey 1996; McMillan and Schumacher 2006; Moss 2004). Field notes, interviews, journals, letters, autobiographies, and orally told stories are all methods of narrative inquiry. In this study, semi-structured interviews were used to provide an opportunity for academics to share and reflect upon their experiences as well as to bring new meanings of change and growth in their lives.

As this study was grounded in the complexities of concrete experience, this meant I could only comment on those participants’ narratives provided through the data (Hodkinson and Hodkinson 2003). Methodologically, this approach can overcome the tension noted by Clandinin and Connelly (2000) between writing a narrative that represents the experiences of the research participants and creating a generalizable theory which means that the richness of narrative experiences are lost. As such, the academics’ narratives are grounded in the complexities of their experiences. It is, therefore, possible to see them, ‘. . . as both distinctive individuals and embedded in the communities of primary importance to them’ (Henkel 2000, 250–251).

The site of this research study was Equity University. The percentage of academic staff by ‘race’ at Equity University comprised the following 76 per cent white, 15 per cent African; 5 per cent Indian; 4 per cent Coloured. The percentage of academic staff by gender comprised 66 per cent female and 34 per cent male. The research sample comprised of three participants who were newly appointed academics working in the department of Teaching and Training, in the faculty of education at

a former Afrikaans medium university. All three participants had completed their Masters degrees, one of them was pursuing a doctorate degree and all of them were in mid-career at the time of this research. The number of years as an academic in the faculty ranged between six months and two-and-a-half years.

The author, a black academic herself (Indian), decided to conduct this research as she was aware of differences between the ways lecturers were treated according to race not only at her own institution but at other universities as well. As an academic in the field of diversity, social justice, race and identity she crossed many communities of practice in terms of networking, attending conferences and various forums in her area of specialization. These occasions provided her with a number of opportunities to engage with fellow black academics from various other former white South African universities, all of whom seemed to be experiencing the same problem. This motivated the author to conduct this research study at Equity University, an institution that was different from the one at which the author was employed. The interviewees in this research study were known to the author through these communities of practice. Two of the interviewees talked so powerfully and emotionally about their experiences of marginalization as they could relate openly to the author who was a black academic herself.

The data was analysed utilising qualitative content analysis (Mayring 2000; Sandelowski 2000). Codes were generated from the data and continuously modified by the researcher's treatment of the data 'to accommodate new data and new insights about those data' (Sandelowski 2000, 338). This was a reflexive and an interactive process that yielded extensive codes and themes. The extensive codes were further analyzed to identify data related to key concepts in the research question, theoretical frameworks, and literature review (Miles and Huberman 1994). Multiple readings of the data were conducted, organizing codes and themes into higher levels of categories within and across the interviews, observations, and other sources of data (Merriam 1998).

FINDINGS

'Swimming against the forceful tide'

At the onset of the interview the participant visibly broke down in tears indicative of how the topic was affecting her and she cried for the duration of the interview. She put her head in her hands and sobbed uncontrollably. I immediately went to her and reassured her and she just said that being at Equity University is 'just so bad, just so bad . . . I can't take it anymore'. As the interviewer, I offered to stop the interview and conduct it at a more amenable time when the participant was not under so much of emotional duress. She insisted that I continue and that I switch on the tape-recorder and then her pent up emotions gushed forth in a torrent of words. Months and months (1 year and 3 months) of unhappiness that had been swelling

within her and slowly gnawing away at her self-esteem suddenly found an outlet in the form of an empathetic listener.

What impressed me the most was that she put on such a brave front. She always had this cheerful smile on her face and carried it off with such a marked degree of panache' one could never have guessed that beneath that cheerful exterior lay so much pent up emotions, conflict, grief and feelings of worthlessness. Her personal, academic and professional identities had been seriously questioned from every level of the academe (line manager, dean, administration, staff and students). It seemed that the institution had been geared to 'break her down' physically, emotionally, mentally and psychologically and she begins to question her self-identity and to question whether fifteen years after democracy the pigmentation of one's skin still matters? Is she in any way 'sub-human' she ponders? How is it possible that in a democratic country at the level of the academe one can be made to feel so humiliated and dehumanised as if you are worth less than a grain of salt? She claims that she was constantly made to feel 'unworthy, unwelcome, as if she was invading territory'. This left her with a feeling of alienation and displacement. 'You feel like you not part of the whole set up'.

Nomsa hails from the North West province in South Africa. Her primary education was at a farm school. Her secondary education was completed at a college that was divided into a secondary school and a teacher training college. She successfully obtained a BA Education degree from the University of Bophuthatswana and subsequently began teaching at a former African school at which she remained for three years. She was then appointed as a lecturer at a teacher training college where she spent four years. Her experiences of schooling, tertiary education, first years as a teacher and lecturer at a teacher training college were during the 'apartheid era' and thus at all segregated institutions. During this time she completed her honours degree in Afrikaans and began her masters in Afrikaans. Before completing her masters she was appointed as a lecturer at the University of the North in 1996 to teach Afrikaans language education. She remained at the University of the North until 2008 when she was appointed at Equity University. She identifies herself as

A South African. My ethnic identity does not really matter to me or define who I am. I am just a South African, like any other citizen of this country.

Nomsa found her way to Equity University by responding to an advertisement in paper. She recalls that

when I applied, I did not think I would get it, its one of those things you sent and then forget about it.

Her subsequent acceptance of this post saw her undergoing much personal sacrifice. She had to uproot herself and her family and moved from the Northwest province to Gauteng.

It was more like a natural decision for me so much so that I was just happy to get this opportunity. This university is so reputable. I saw it a step up from my previous university.

Communities of practice within the faculty

In her letter of appointment Nomsa was informed that she should schedule an appointment with the Dean of the faculty on the day of her arrival, which she duly did. The dean 'hurriedly welcomed and gave me a few names of people that she thought I could relate to'. Nomsa recalls that her first day at Equity University was 'not that bad' in terms of the administrative functioning

I reported at administration and was brought to my HoD's office. The departmental secretary showed me my office that had my name on it. She also gave me the code for the photocopy machine. However, in terms of my work I was not told what to do.

She was not formally initiated into the department or the faculty. Neither was she formally introduced to the staff or provided with any orientation in terms of the work environment. Introductions to other staff members were done in an adhoc way.

The department secretary was taking me to my office and then someone comes past and then she says 'Tom come here, this is Nomsa'. Some people still look at me now [1 year and 3 months later] as if what are you doing here?

Staff reactions varied. Because members of staff were not formally introduced to her

People stared. They were looking at me like so who is this and what is she doing here? Like I am lost and I could tell that they were sceptical. This was the general reaction. I kept on feeling that I was just a stranger encroaching into other people's territory. This had a severe impact on my self esteem and intellectual integrity.

Interactions with her immediate line manager [HoD] provided her with opportunities to witness how others in the department received preferential treatment

Once or twice after department meetings my HoD invited us to go to tea and once you got there you are on your own. He sits with other white staff, even if they are not from the department. You just sit on your own.

She laments the fact that nobody took the time to recognise or value her academic identity. Something that she highly valued, and had nurtured over the years as evident from her excellent academic track record.

My academic identity did not come through. I was given no guidance by my HoD. My HoD informed me that I needed to wait for a white male colleague who lectured to pre-service teachers to tell me what to do. My HoD was busy with his own thing. The

only time he came was when he wanted me to assist this white colleague [more in the form of an assistant] in the postgraduate certificate of education programme towards the end of June. I had reported for duty on the 1 April. Maybe I was just appointed because of my colour to be represented here and definitely if this was the case I would not have accepted.

The thing that made Nomsa extremely frustrated and angry was the fact that she was utilised as what she calls ‘a stop-gap’.

I was appointed and informed that I need to assume duty as soon as possible, but when I arrived here I was just ignored. I sat in my office for weeks nobody said this is your responsibility. One of the temporary white lecturers sustained an injury and was put off from work. I was then called in as a “stop-gap”. It did not matter that what she taught was not my line of work.

She was then asked to stand in for another white temporary lecturer who left. What angered her was the fact that she was appointed in March and told to report for duty on the 1 April as a matter of urgency. But, when ‘I came here, there was nothing to do. Why was it urgent, I was just made to feel useless?’ All she did for the better part of the year that she was appointed [2008] was to just sit like an assistant in the postgraduate certificate of education programme. As if I had to indirectly do some personal in-service training to prove that I was competent to be at this university despite the fact that I possessed the necessary qualifications and had accumulated years of teaching experience at tertiary institutions.

She argues that her work allocation happened all by chance. A vacancy appeared because of unforeseen circumstances and the HoD then just wanted me to fill it. My specialisation was not taken into consideration. I had to read in order to lecture, as much of what I was lecturing was new. I guess more than anything else those few weeks was so frustrating that I just accepted whatever came, because it was something to do.

Another bone of contention for Nomsa, aside from being treated as an assistant, was the fact that she was not allocated any students for supervision, despite the fact that she had supervised students at her previous university.

I was not given any students to supervise, yet I know of a white colleague [refers here to Zelda] who also only has her masters degree and who is here now only for six months who was allocated two students for supervision.

However, she still remained optimistic against all odds and saw some opportunities at Equity University.

I think there is much opportunity for growth. The problem is access. I just don’t know how to *access it*. *In my department, there is no guidance. There is a serious of lack of directive.*

The most challenging thing for Nomsa was to be accepted as a member of this university community and to be acknowledged. From all levels they just don’t acknowledge you. My HoD did not even take the time to talk to me. It made me

feel that when people do that they have a problem, He has a problem which he is struggling to deal with. He hasn't really accepted that people like me will be here and be able to do what we can do.

Communities of practice beyond the faculty

Nomsa had only attended departmental staff functions with limited interactions with the staff, especially white staff members. In terms of broader community structures, she was not involved in any projects and was not given an opportunity to attend any conferences. No mentorship was provided. Her response to how she identified as an academic at Equity University

More than anything . . . all the other things I can deal with . . . feeling that you are not treated equally, you are treated differently makes you feel less South African . . . that has the biggest impact. Why is it that Zelda who is now here only for six months is getting on better with people? Why is she is more at home than I am? I could not help but wonder if it had anything to do with race?

As an 'assistant' to the white male colleague of the postgraduate certificate of education programme she had the opportunity to be exposed to a talk by an international academic from New Zealand. However, she was introduced in the following way

This is Nomsa she is working in the programme I am getting her to be able to do what I want her to do. I felt that he is giving this impression that he is giving me something, that I don't have the capacity. Why did they employ me if they think I did not have the capacity?

Nomsa stated that if she had known what she now knows about Equity University she would never have accepted this post. She was willing to come to Equity University because of its reputation and strong research agenda, but desperately regrets her decision. Nomsa resigned from Equity University at the end of July 2009.

Swimming against the tide. The tide pushes you back but you just need to go on.

'Like a homecoming kind of thing'

Zelda was full of smiles and it seemed as if she could not wait for the interview to commence. The duration of her interview was much shorter than Nomsa's as she did not seem to have anything to complain about. She claimed that her new environment was 'So great, I can't believe all the freedom I have'.

Zelda is a white Afrikaans-speaking female. All her formal education was at Afrikaans medium institutions. She obtained her BA, HED and Honours degree in Afrikaans and taught Afrikaans for seven years at one school. She was seconded to a teacher training college in Gauteng to lecture in Northern Sotho in 1993, but had to leave after 2 months due to retrenchment of staff. She left teaching and went into the insurance business for 3 years. She returned to teaching, and taught Afrikaans for

another ten years at a private school. She joined Equity University in August 2008. At the time of this interview she had been six months at Equity University. She came to be at the university by word of mouth and formally through the advertisement. She identifies as 'a South African'.

Communities of practice within the faculty

She describes her first day at Equity University as follows:

I passed my office on the way to meet my HoD and the departmental secretary. I was pleasantly surprised to see my name already next to an office door. I met with my HoD and I felt very comfortable. He was very friendly . . . it was like coming in a known place. I did not report to the dean.

Her formal initiation into the department unfolded as the departmental secretary took me around and introduced me to other people in their offices. After a couple of days the dean came by and visited me in my office. I found it strange . . . came by and greeted me with a hug and I found this very weird.

She was also informed by her HoD that she needed to attend the staff induction programme that was offered university-wide in order to familiarise herself with her new working environment. Her formal introduction at faculty level occurred when the dean hosted 'a small function to welcome a few new staff members and say goodbye to others at the end of August'.

The reaction of staff towards her was in general very friendly and welcoming.

I found it very comfortable . . . like a homecoming kind of thing. Staff was very friendly, very welcoming. Everyone was very helpful and gave advice. People approached me and the departmental secretary also introduced me the first couple of days to everyone.

Her work was allocated to her by the HoD. She was assigned to teach one of the undergraduate modules on education and began teaching in the second week of August. The HoD gave her the 'study guide, the reader and some transparencies' to teach this module. As she had completed her masters in technology education, the HoD liaised with the sub-department of Technology in an attempt to get her involved in the programmes that were on offer as quickly as possible. She was later given an elective module in the M. Ed. (Technology) programme, 'the course content, outline, assessment and study guide were made available to me electronically'.

Communities of practice beyond the faculty

Opportunities for communities of practice beyond the faculty were initiated by her HoD. These opportunities took the form of cross disciplinary networking, academic exposure at conferences and academic growth in terms of pursuing a doctorate degree that stemmed from a project that was currently being implemented, as a way of fast-tracking her growth.

Very soon my HoD gave me a project to work on. This was a Provincial Project utilising technology in teaching and learning. The leader of this project was a

professor in another department. Participation in this project gave me the opportunity to go to more than one conference and my doctorate will also be based on this. The leader of this project is going to be my supervisor.

A major challenge for Zelda was time management ‘. . . feeding the right dog at the right time’. Another was marking. The undergraduate module had a large number of students. Zelda claims that she was always a language person and I changed my role to that of a technology teacher because I wanted to get away from the marking.

Her networking in communities of practice beyond the faculty flowed into social events as well.

My head of department and his wife, one of my fellow lecturers [her intended supervisor] and his wife and a visiting professor from Australia visited me and my husband. We had a meal together and chatted all evening. It was great to be able to socialise and to get to know one another on a different level.

Zelda had the good fortune to be surrounded by mentors. The white professors in the sub-department of Technology served as mentors to her. Her M. Ed. thesis was supervised by one of these professors.

In response to how Equity University compared with her previous job Zelda replied,

Oh! It is so much better here. You have so much freedom and I am fortunate to be surrounded by people who really care about me and my career. I absolutely love it here. I feel like I belong here . . . like I am at home.

‘Treated like a little boy’

As I entered the room in which the interview was going to be conducted, I could not help but feel the very tangible and strong professional ethos that seemed to permeate the air. Rajesh an Indian male who had joined Equity University in 2006 invited me to take a seat in a very courteous and friendly manner. One could not help but be aware of his strong academic identity and presence. This was an academic who really took his job seriously. His many years of rich experience in the teaching fraternity and his passion to make a difference in education were very much apparent.

At the time of data capture Rajesh had been at Equity University for almost two-and-a-half years. Like Nomsa and Zelda he too was a product of the apartheid era and completed all his schooling and teacher training education (not as his career of choice, but a career of affordability) at segregated institutions that catered exclusively for Indian students. During his years of teaching he completed a part BSc degree, a BA degree, a postgraduate diploma and a Masters degree. He taught for 26 years at all levels of the school system, with most of his years of teaching experience as a teacher of mathematics to grade 12 learners. During that time he was seconded to a teacher’s training college for a period of three years, teaching mathematics methodology and a University Mathematics bridging course. He held an HOD post

in mathematics at a secondary school, and shortly afterwards was promoted to deputy principal and a year later to principal. He served a period of ten years as principal of a primary school. After completing his M. Ed. degree in Technology and despite his years of rich teaching experience he was appointed at the level of lecturer at Equity University in 2006, a post that he holds to date. He registered for his PhD degree in 2007. He identifies as ‘a South African Indian male academic’. He came to Equity High as a result of an advertisement in the newspaper.

Communities of practice within the faculty

Rajesh vividly remembered his first day at Equity University. He arrived for work professionally attired in a suit and tie ensemble.

As a teacher for 26 years I found it very difficult not to wear formal attire. I felt confident and respectable to wear a tie to work. I sat in the foyer of the HOD’s office with my small notebook eager to take notes on what was expected of me. Coincidentally the dean (now former dean) had come to see the HoD and I thus had the opportunity to be welcomed by him. Both my HoD and the dean were attired in casual clothes. I felt a bit awkward but still felt this is me I will not compromise on my attire.

Rajesh remained in limbo for about three hours and then the HoD convened a meeting with the programme co-ordinators of technology. He later came to learn that ‘technology’ functioned ‘unofficially’ as a sub-department within the department. He was welcomed into the programme and told that he would be lecturing some modules in the Advanced Certificate of Education programme and one module in the Masters in Education programme. When he enquired as to whether he could have access to the course outcomes or a copy of the study guide, to orientate himself with regard to what was expected in these modules he was informed ‘we are not obligated to give you anything except the course code’. Rajesh’s managerial experience came to the fore and he wondered how then would his modules fit in with what was being taught in the other modules in the programme? He was also informed that he will be responsible for the co-ordination of the M. Ed. (Technology) programme.

The programme co-ordinator of PhD studies, his junior by age, indicated to the HOD that he would show Rajesh to his office. En-route to his office the programme co-ordinator informed him that

I had walked into a “hornet’s nest” and that I would soon find that this job is not what it seems to be. His very next sentence was “why don’t you apply for the principal’s post at Saxon High, I am on the board of governors and could put in a word for you”. This was like a death knell to me, I did not even put my foot into my office, and now I am told to apply out.

Rajesh spent the rest of the day in his office. He was not introduced to anybody and was left on his own. No formal initiation process was followed to introduce Rajesh to members of the department. He states,

I was thrown into the deep end, and had to “sink or swim”, this made me determined to succeed irrespective of challenges thrown at me. In retrospect, I do not see my “initiation” as challenges but rather obstacles that were deliberately placed with the intention that I fail.

In general his experience with the staff was cordial, that is with staff outside Technology. Within Technology he soon came to realise what ‘the hornet’s nest’ was all about. Members of the Technology team sat in on his appointment interview. After his appointment remarks were made that he was appointed because he was ‘black’ to meet the requirements of the transformation agenda. Numerous attempts were made to discredit him, to taint his credibility and to question his competence.

Every step I had taken to manage the course was met with bureaucratic hurdles, by other “white lecturers” in Technology. I was summarily invited to meetings where the agenda was set and caucusing had already taken place.

His workload was allocated to him on the first day by colleagues in the sub-department of Technology. A professor close to retirement who had only just recently made the shift from language instruction to Technology and who had been responsible for the two modules in the ACE programme that had now been allocated to Rajesh, assumed the role of ‘line manager’. Rajesh recounts,

He would meet me 15 minutes prior to lectures and instruct me on the content I had to teach to ACE students for a three hour session. There were neither syllabi nor study guides; I was told that ‘we are painting the bus while it is moving’. I was given administrative tasks in piece-meal fashion, and then told to report back after each task was done . . . I guess as a black academic it was beyond my intellect to be able to multi-task? I am 49 years old, a teacher for 26 years and a principal for 10 of these 26 years, yet I was treated “like a little boy”. My academic and intellectual integrity was being questioned all the time.

In December 2006, Rajesh was informed by the white professors in the sub-department of Technology that he had to teach all ten modules in the ACE programme the following year. Rajesh wondered what the role of his immediate line manager (HoD) was if all decisions pertaining to him were taken by other colleagues in Technology. There was no course content, no course outcomes, nothing. He had to design and teach everything together with his initial workload in the other programmes. His managerial expertise came to the fore and he began planning for 2007 as coordinator of the M. Ed. programme. His strong professional identity dictated that he be well prepared for all modules. He consulted with the HOD and then sent out the allocation to all Technology lecturers, including the allocation for a lecturer that was appointed but not yet present. He was immediately told by the ‘white professors’ in Technology that he could not make unilateral decisions and had to wait until all lecturers could meet to discuss workloads. Rajesh recalled,

this was not the practice when I was appointed and now suddenly the tables have

turned as the incoming lecturer was a “white” lecturer and therefore her interests had to be protected.

Further, he argued that at a planning workshop, work load figures were ‘thumb-sucked’ to demonstrate high teaching loads of ‘white lecturers’ and decreased to show low teaching loads of black lecturers, without any negotiation. At Technology meetings the entire ‘white’ professoriate produced spreadsheets of their enormous workloads of thousands of hours for lecturing and supervision, compared to his meagre two hundred odd hours. This data was presented to the HOD after being employed for only three months at Equity University.

I was made to feel that I was not earning my keep at the university, and I was overburdening my colleagues. A year later, because I was the M. Ed. programme co-ordinator I came to find out that these were highly inflated figures because the names of some students were not on the registration list. They had deregistered a long time ago.

During the first two years at Equity High, Rajesh was not allocated any students for supervision, despite the fact that he and Zelda had successfully completed their M. Ed. degree under the supervision of the same ‘white professor’ in the ‘sub-department’ of Technology. In the beginning of his third year he was given students that

were either not coping well, defaulted in terms of their years of study or were turned away by other white lecturers and allocated to him by default. When I was finally allocated new students, they were only black students.

Not only was his academic, intellectual and professional sense of self being assaulted, but at times it took the form of personal, emotional and psychological abuse.

My worst day as a human being, let alone the fact that I was a principal, and an experienced teacher, was when I knocked on the door of one of the white professors in Technology requesting permission to enter. As I sat down, he got up and started to sneeze profusely, on clearing his throat he said, he had never had an experience of sneezing like that in his office and it must be something in his office. He immediately made me feel as though I had brought on his bout of sneezing, I felt insulted and dehumanised.

The major challenge for Rajesh was to be recognised and acknowledged in terms of his competence as an academic and an intellectual as well as in terms of his years of experience.

As a black academic there is the feeling that I have to constantly prove myself, I have to demonstrate that I am competent and that I have earned my position as an academic. As far as my identity in the faculty, I am still trying to find myself, I often feel lost or insignificant in the system. I’m left all on my own with no directive or guidance.

Communities of practice beyond the faculty

Communities of practice beyond the faculty were extremely limited. He was left to sit in his office on his own. His office was next to two other offices for Technology, but these offices were rarely inhabited by the white professors. He was not invited to any social events outside of faculty functions. As research was high on the agenda at Equity University and an 'allocator' of life chances in terms of promotion, funding, networking, conference attendance etc. a senior black colleague from within the department realised that Rajesh needed to learn about his role as a researcher. She thus invited him to join her externally funded research project that was really out of his field of interest, but it was one way of introducing him to the world of research. He was glad to be given this opportunity and took on the computer data analysis of the research project. He thus learnt something about procedures and protocols regarding research projects and was also given the opportunity to be exposed to conferences and networking.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

A number of significant findings have emerged from this study. First, after almost fifteen years of democracy, the inner workings of the University in the form of communities of practice both within and beyond the faculty continue to operate along racial lines. Opportunities to participate in communities of practice beyond the University were very much linked to racial identity, as evident from Zelda's experiences. Opportunities were provided for Zelda to locate herself beyond the boundaries of the University, thus enhancing her participation and encouraging her to take on new professional identities. Sharing a common racial identity also involved shifting locations and led to participation in other communities of practice that were socially desirable as evident from Zelda's 'social gathering event', thus encouraging growth in the social identity of this academic. Zelda had a good spread of intangible, tangible and non-work related benefits and inducement variables that worked in harmony towards generating strong professional identities in each of these domains and made for a happy and balanced academic who felt a 'sense of belonging and feeling at home' at Equity University. Such practices contributed to the construction of a valued professional identity for academics such as Zelda, while a lack of these practices contributed to conflictual professional identities and had debilitating and devastating influences on the formation of identities of those academics who did not belong to the 'chosen race group'.

The phenomenon of 'black academics on the move' (Potgieter 2002) has become popular because many black academics struggle to find a sense of belonging at former white universities. During the apartheid era, South African society viewed and characterized racism mainly as individually perpetrated acts that were mostly overt in nature and easily identifiable. Institutional racism at Equity University takes on a more pernicious, insidious and covert form. It is generally less visible, silent and cancerous, thus even more destructive of human life. Because institutionalized

racism is created and perpetuated by institutions, it seems like a more anonymous, abstract, less concretely tangible point of reference of wrongdoing. How do you as an individual take on this amorphous mass called the institution? What influence does this silent, formless yet pulsating racism have on the formation of academic identities?

Second, for all three academics, being a member of the disciplinary community involved a clear sense of professional identity and participation, as evident from both Nomsa's and Rajesh's eagerness to have their academic identity and intellectual integrity acknowledged and recognised. Their yearning for some of the intangible benefits and inducement variables such as congeniality of associates, rapport with department leaders, career advancement opportunities, teaching and assignment opportunities, research opportunities, influence in department and influence in institution painfully surfaced in their narratives.

Third, for Nomsa and Rajesh, a sense of belonging and the desire for membership at an institutional level also informed the place that they occupied in the landscape of practice at that time. Their identity construction illustrated the conflict between actively participating in the discipline and maintaining relations with this community. Their opportunities to recreate a professional identity were often diminished as their sense of self was revealed and exposed and as they were asked to take on given external agendas. For both Nomsa and Rajesh, legitimate participation at an institutional level entailed the loss of certain identities. Rajesh had begun to anticipate the need to renegotiate his identity before it was formulated into practice; over a period of time re-identification had occurred, which now involved a different conception of how he saw himself. This opened up some of the complexities involved in the situated negotiations in which he attempted to sustain what he valued about his identity, recognising that certain identities did not fit well with his self-image. For Nomsa, the disciplinary community did not always contribute to a positive sense of self. Her hopes and expectations were influenced by exposure to the realities of her institutional context. By reliving her professional experiences, it became evident that building a professional identity involved a difficult interaction between the institution and herself.

Fourth, black academics had to work so much harder to prove their competence even though they had the academic qualifications and years of teaching experience at tertiary institutions. For both Rajesh and Nomsa their professional and academic identities were constantly being questioned and undermined. They did not receive any postgraduate students for supervision during the first or second years. Power relations are very much at play as supervision of postgraduate students is the gatekeeper to promotion, research funding, exposure, research projects, networking etc. In his third year at Equity University, Rajesh received one student who was already in her fourth year. She had been allocated to another supervisor for the past three years and had done no work to date. It was expected of Rajesh that he supervise this student to completion in the remaining year of her study – clearly an impossible task. Decisions were then made on his competence as a supervisor.

Furthermore, Rajesh was given a heavy teaching load, compiling of ten modules for one programme, six of which he taught, in addition one module in the masters programme. In this way there was very little time to develop a research agenda. In addition, Rajesh who was already two and a half years at Equity University and who had an academic track record in Maths and Computer Science was not involved with the Provincial Technology Project that was directly in his field of interest. Yet, Zelda who was only there for six months, and specialised mainly in Afrikaans language studies was immediately involved in this project. She was also allocated two white students for supervision. Such institutional practices physically, psychologically and emotionally erodes the self-esteem of black academics and creates a sense of worthlessness. These were some of the ways of ensuring that both Rajesh and Nomsa were not fast-tracked in terms of their academic trajectories which adversely impacted on their academic and professional identities.

CONCLUSION

The narratives of these academics were interweaved with stories of shifting identities, as they moved into, out of, and through communities of practice and located aspects of their professional identities across many contexts and often indicated the struggle to live their professional lives in a way which was consistent with their professional values and actions. First, they reflected on the level of participation and their non-participation and marginalization within the disciplinary community. Second, there remained a desire to maintain their academic identities within the wider community through active participation in teaching and research.

The construction and negotiation of academic identities were determined by time, place and sociality and lived through the discourses academics employed to make sense of who they were (Britzman 1992). Their experiences of different communities of practice entailed ‘ambivalent relations of multimembership’ (Lave and Wenger 1991) and the complexities and tensions inherent in professional identity building often led to non-participation in which there existed, a split between a person’s activities and their relations with participation, a rupture between what she is actually doing and how she finds herself located in the “community” (Hodges 1998, 273).

The formation of academic identities is to a large extent defined by power relations inherent and characteristic of an institution; the intricate and subtle workings of which play a pivotal role in affirming or negating academic identities.

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