Becoming an Academic: Professional Identity on the Road to Tenure

AVRIL AITKEN
Bishop's University

ABSTRACT: This paper, presented in first person narrative, looks at the tensions that exist when professional identity in higher education is constructed with and against teaching identity. Using a post-structuralist perspective and an auto-ethnographic approach, the author explores her own experience of seeking to successfully secure tenure. An analysis of the author's written self-representations destined for hiring and evaluation committees is followed by an analysis of spontaneous writing that emerged through the research process. A juxtaposition of the analyses reveals the tensions that exist when academic work follows a previous career. The paper provides insight into the formation of professional identity of one new academic appointee and draws attention to the need to better understand professional identity in higher education.

RESUMÉ: Cet article présenté à la première personne, considère les tensions qui existent quand l'identité professionnelle dans les études supérieures, est forgée avec, et contre, l'identité enseignante. En se servant d'un point de vue post structuraliste et d'une approche auto ethnographique, l'auteur fouille dans sa propre expérience, celle qui est constituée d'une quête vers la titularisation sécurisante. Une analyse d'écrits spontanés qui a émergé à travers la procédure de recherche, fait suite à une analyse de l'auteur d'auto représentations écrites consacrées à l'embauche et aux comités d'évaluation. Un ensemble d'analyses révèle les malaises qui existent quand le travail universitaire vient à la suite d'une autre carrière. Cet article nous montre un aperçu de la formation de l'identité professionnelle d'un des nouveaux candidats universitaires retenus et attire l'attention sur le besoin de mieux comprendre l'identité professionnelle dans les études supérieures.

Introduction

The formation of professional identity is one interest that brought me back to the world of higher education several years after having

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completed my doctoral degree. I had not sought out a university position upon graduation, as I was involved in stimulating professional work at the time. I reconsidered employment in the academic world because of a desire to take on new challenges and to continue to explore teacher professional identity in a structured and sustained way. Significantly, it is my own professional identity that occupies my thoughts as I attempt to successfully navigate the road to tenure. I have been wrestling with the roles of teacher and researcher; I have been struggling with my own investments in what feels like a *teaching identity*, one shaped by two decades in public education. I am not alone in experiencing the tension between positions that are lived in a university setting. The literature makes reference to such struggles and to the desire of some academics to "feel more integrated" (Ellis, Bochner, Denzin, Lincoln, Morse, Pelias & Richardson, 2008, p. 266). While the search for integration is a compelling notion, I am interested in how identity is constructed in higher education and in why my identity as teacher feels so important to me now, as I navigate this road.

The introductory paragraph above, contains a claim that is somewhat troubling to me; in it, I refer to a teaching identity that has been shaped over time. When I initially described my identity this way, I did so unselfconsciously. Yet the perspective of the humanistic, unified, and authentic self runs counter to what I have researched, written, and voiced elsewhere about identity and identity formation. DeFreitas and Paton (2009) indicate that this contradiction is not unheard of in the work of post-humanist researchers. They indicate that while reflexive approaches to research may be used to allow for partial, fractured, and conflicting identities, "traces of a Humanist self often emerge in [such] writing, even as the writer claims to have abandoned such notions" (DeFreitas & Paton, 2009, p. 485).

The pull of the "I," which Gannon (2006) refers to as "the hegemony of the self" (p. 488), is matched by the appeal of knowing and understanding the self, and narrating one's life story. Ellis and Bochner (2000) describe this as "our narrative attempts to achieve a coherent sense of ourselves" associated with "the very integrity and intelligibility of our selfhood" (p. 746). Groen and Kawalilak (2006) write that that the narrative of one's life story "transforms time from fragmented moments into patterns of meaning" (p. 62). I am aware that my own deep desire for making sense of patterns of meaning is what compelled me to respond to the call for submissions related to navigating the path to tenure. I felt drawn to write about the personal versus the theoretical

and conceptual, as I felt compelled to make sense of the feeling that I am not quite in the "right place." Subsequently, this text is an interrogation of the social and psychological uses of my self-representation as more teacher than researcher. For the reader, this auto-ethnography from a poststructuralist perspective serves as an invitation, intended to stimulate thinking about the formation of identity in higher education on the road to tenure.

Theoretical Framework

The interpretive lens for this study is a poststructuralist theorization of identity, which proposes that one's identity is the voice and meaning one give to one's experiences (Bloom, 1998; Robertson, 2004; Soreide, 2006; Zembylas, 2003, 2005). This is a view of identity that contrasts sharply with the humanistic image of the self as "a stable, reliable integrative entity" (Flax, 1990, p. 8). In this text the position taken is that the self is not fixed, and unified, and waiting to be uncovered. This perspective holds that identity is constantly shifting and transforming in successive contexts (Bloom, 1998; Robertson, 2004). Changing contexts result in multiples ways of being, that is, multiple positions or identities.

The Role of Language and Discourse

Masny (2004) describes this constant shifting and transformation as "a continuous investment in becoming" (p. 5). Masny makes a point of indicating that the identities are not fixed. I concur; however, I maintain that the perception of fixing occurs when an individual makes a self-representation. For example, a statement such as "I am more teacher than researcher" may appear to some to be an authentic claim about a fixed, central or unified set of characteristics about the self. From a poststructuralist perspective, the statement is a representation of one moment in a dynamic and continuously transformational process (Bloom, 1998; Masny, 2004; Robertson, 2004; Soreide, 2006; Zembylas, 2003, 2005). Therefore from this perspective, identity is produced discursively in changing everyday contexts and is expressed in speaking and writing. In our written and spoken expression we position ourselves, that is, we draw on discourses that offer a range of possible ways of giving meaning to the world. Each discourse is a system of thought, a network of historically, socially, institutionally specific beliefs, categories, statements and terms that give meaning to the world (Flax, 1990; St. Pierre, 2000; Weedon, 1997).

Context, Power and Desire

An individual's conscious and unconscious desire will influence the positions taken (Aitken, in press; Robertson, 2004; Weedon, 1997). Additionally, identity is worked out intersubjectively (Hollway, 1989; Watson, 2006; Zembylas, 2003), in contexts where power relations are at work (Bloom, 1998; Foucault, 1997; Zembylas 2003, 2005). Thus, interior and exterior factors influence identity formation in ways that may – or may not – be evident to the individual. In short, "positioning" happens through subtle negotiated shifts in power, where individuals interdependently work out who each can be at that moment in time, given what each thinks, believes, and desires. Each position taken will contrast with other possible ways of being.

Academic Identity

Identity positioning in higher education takes place in the full range of contexts associated with academic practice. For example, the university classroom can be linked to the position of the academic as the authorized disciplinary speaker (Lapping, 2006). Other positions associated with academic identity include the autonomous professional, the collegial professional, and the intellectual (Clegg, 2008). Trowler and Knight (2000) claim that the positions of the academic may be viewed as being either accommodating or alienated and oppositional. Further, the literature also shows that positions taken may express resistance to the existing pedagogic or disciplinary structures in the university (Clegg, 2008; Lapping, 2006).

The power dynamics at work in each context will influence the resistance or identification that individuals have to particular discursive positions. Newly appointed academics may face significant challenges in coming to understand and navigate the multiple contexts of the university and the power relations at work (Trowler & Knight, 2000). The challenges are particularly evident if the new appointees are seeking to be research-active academics (Tynan & Garbett, 2007); in such cases, they may struggle to position themselves as authentic and successful (Archer, 2008). Additionally, for both new and more seasoned academics, the current trend toward performativity has resulted in new discursive positions such as that of the academic as threatened, inadequate, or resistant to managerialism (Archer, 2008). Clegg, however, writes that, "despite all the pressure of performativity,

individuals have created spaces for the exercise of principled personal autonomy and agency" (2008, p. 343).

A position associated with such personal agency is evident in Groen and Kawalilak's (2006) work; they describe the academic professional as a community builder. Tynan and Garbett (2007) also focus on the relational in their description of the academic as collaborative researcher. "Collaboration," they write, "has diffused the competitive expectation to 'prove ourselves' and allowed us to reposition ourselves as emerging academics" (p. 422). For Tynan and Garbett positioning oneself as collaborator is directly linked to "play[ing] the political game ... learn[ing] the ropes ... [taking] 'a step up the ladder' " (p. 423). The explicit intention is to ensure success according to the traditional competitive standards. For Groen and Kawalilak (2006), however, the position of collaborator is connected with deep investment in the creation of a workplace culture that "enacts authentic community which honours the diversity of individual creativity and vocation, and thus, realizes the riches gained through human interconnectedness" (p. 67). While the position of collaborator is understood differently in the above examples, both texts show how the positioning process contributes to what Clegg (2008) refers to as "strongly framed academic projects of the self" (p. 340). Thus, academic identity does not map neatly onto each of the three occupational roles of the academic, as may be construed from my earlier statement that I am "more teacher than researcher." Instead it is "part of the lived complexity of a person's project and their ways of being in those sites which are constituted as being part of the academic" (Clegg, 2008, p. 329).

Methodology

In order to explore identity formation and my own experience of the road to tenure, I chose to analyze the formal written representations that I made in a series of documents that I submitted to the university hiring and evaluation committees between June 2006 and November 2008. From the perspective of interpretation, insight into identity formation can be had through discursive analysis of the representations that individuals make (Bloom, 1998). I have structured the inquiry as auto-ethnography, as I am examining my own experience and am using the process to better understand my investments in teacher identity. Ellis and Bochner (2000) describe auto-ethnography as "an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" (p. 733).

The poststructuralist perspective to exploring identity presents challenges. First of all, when working with representations, we must take the position that realist stories and transparent recollections are *constructions*. We must then interrogate those constructions to identify how specific beliefs, values, desires, and dynamics of power are at work (Britzman, 1995). For the auto-ethnographer seeking to work in a poststructuralist paradigm, the situation is paradoxical. Auto-ethnography is associated with self-knowledge and the possibility of understanding "who we really are." Yet notions such as authenticity of the self and the true self are not consistent with the poststructuralist perspective I have stated I would use.

Despite the apparent contradiction between poststructuralism and auto-ethnography, Gannon (2006) makes a case for working with both by drawing on the work of the French Poststructuralists, such as Cixous, Derrida, and Barthes. "These authors write themselves as unreliable and contradictory narrators ... in discontinuous fragments informed by memory, the body, photographs, other texts, and, most importantly, other people" (p. 491). Their process of "writing the self-writing" results in "messy" texts that challenge normative perspectives on narration of self-stories. Gannon, however, goes on to describe strategies that can be employed, including unconventional use of "layout and format and voice" (2006, p. 488). One such strategy can be seen in Atkinson-Baldwyn's (2009) text, where the two voices of the researcher are laid out side by side in two columns. Regardless of the strategy used to capture the self-stories, DeFreitas and Paton (2009) suggest that poststructuralist auto-ethnography can be used to better understand the identity formation process and its implications. The purpose, as Gannon (2006) writes, should be to "foreground the limits and fragility of self-knowledge" (p. 492).

The initial process for this inquiry, therefore, involved analysis of the formal texts through which I represented myself between June 2006 and November 2008. The nine texts fall into four sets. Each set is connected to one of four key events on the road to tenure: application for a full-time replacement contract, application for a tenure stream position, evaluation for promotion, and evaluation for reappointment. Each set is composed of one or more documents such as a cover letter, an introduction to a professional portfolio, a graphic representation, or an introductory paragraph linked to sections within the professional portfolio. The audiences for the first two sets were hiring committees made up of professors from within the School of Education, student

representatives, and university administrators. The audience for the third and forth sets was the university evaluation committee made up of professors from different divisions, as well as a university administrator.

For the purpose of this research, the texts were treated as constructions rather than realist accounts; I focused primarily on the ways in which notions of teacher and researcher are constructed in the texts. Additionally, I used spontaneous writing to follow the fragments of thoughts, incomplete images, or visceral reactions that interrupted my analysis of the formal documents. My purpose was to acknowledge the unconscious, as I have taken the position that it would influence the meaning making process (DeFreitas & Paton, 2009; Robertson, 2004). This particular method of listening to the "ir/rational" arose at the beginning of the analysis process, when a seemingly unconnected recollection broke through as I was working with the data. The decision to follow that unbidden thought in spontaneous writing proved fruitful, so inspired by Gannon (2006), who suggests that researchers draw on and improvise on writing models of the French Poststructuralists named above, I moved back and forward between analysis and spontaneous writing.

In summary, I worked with three types of texts: the formal texts addressed to hiring and evaluation committees, the notes and narrative that were generated while in the process of analyzing the formal texts, and the passages of spontaneous writing. I have focused on (a) the meaning of the discursive constructions of the self that were made in the formal texts, (b) the recurrent themes or common elements in the spontaneous writing, and (c) the connection between the first two.

Discursive Constructions of the Self

The Self in the Formal Texts

The four sets of texts that were analyzed were written with the intention of securing an academic position or a promotion. The texts therefore make repeated mention of the specific tasks associated with academic work, that is, the teaching, research, and service to the university. The analysis shows that I persist in defining authenticity and success by my own standards, rather than institutional norms. I do so by continuously privileging teaching and the role of teacher over researcher. The representations of teacher change in nuanced ways from my past experiences as a teacher to my current practice at the university. In the

fourth set of texts, I represent myself as a practitioner-researcher; this term serves as a bridge between the roles of teacher and researcher. In the same set, I also make the first normative representation of myself as research active according to university expectations. These points are documented in the sections that follow.

"Teachers Teach, Researchers Research. What Do Academics Do?"

In the first two sets of texts, destined for the hiring committees, I have used the word academic only in reference to "academic training" and "academic requirements." Hence, the adjective *academic* refers to past studies or qualifications that appear to exist outside of the impending demands of my job. This use of academic persists until the fourth set of texts, where there is a shift to the embodied position of an academic. Yet, in the same text my struggle to reconcile the roles of teacher and researcher is still evident; I write, "As an academic, should one consider oneself as a researcher who teaches or as a teacher who conducts research?" The text goes on, "perhaps because I originally chose teaching as a profession, I would select the latter." That is, I am a teacher who conducts research. Significantly, the possibility of being an academic who carries out the two tasks of teaching and research is not suggested. My positioning as a "teacher who researches" runs counter to the prevailing discourse that connects academic work with the "performance of particular outcomes (e.g., winning external grants, publishing to order)" (Archer, 2008, p. 392).

The struggle to describe myself as a researcher is evident in text sets one and two. Research and its role are completely absent from the first set, possibly because I was applying for a contractual teaching position. In the second set, which is my application to a tenure stream position, the word research is found in the expressions "research training," "research background," "research interest," "research agenda," and "potential for research and scholarship." Little space is devoted to a description of current research and future aspirations as a researcher, despite the fact that I was research active according to university expectations. In contrast, the documents I submitted provide substantial information about my teaching experience. Additionally, I emphasize "the complementary nature of my expertise" as researcher, facilitator, curriculum writer, and secondary level teacher. I underline that a "research background in connection with two decades of experience as a public school teacher and consultant makes me an ideally suited

candidate" for a professional program. I expand on this with a claim that the complementarity of teaching and training (presumably research training) "must" be taken into account, given the demands of the job. Thus, not only do I set my own criteria for authenticity, but I assert that these criteria must be taken into consideration by the hiring committee.

"But This is a Professional Program"

Research continues to take a back seat in the third set of texts, which are part of a professional portfolio intended to secure promotion. At this point, the requirements of a program for pre-service teachers take center stage. Three quarters of the introduction to my professional portfolio is devoted to an explanation of how past work in "three educational contexts – the classroom, the school board, and the Ministry – gives me a privileged perspective with which to understand the role of a professional program in Education." The emphasis I give to the fact that I am working in a professional program appears to privilege my teaching experience over the institutional requirements for research. This may have contributed to the evaluation committee's initial denial of promotion. In an appeal, which I was encouraged to undertake by colleagues, I presented documentation to support the scholarly and professional work I was doing. I was then granted the promotion. Significantly, the committee indicated that I needed to do a much better job of representing myself.

"How About Practitioner Researcher?"

In the final set of documents, the ones in which I position myself as "an academic," I make the claim that "I am as deeply committed to the world of research as I am to the preparation of pre-service teachers for the world of work." The "world of research" is left undefined but I state that my dissertation was nominated for a university award. It appears that this point is intended to demonstrate my commitment to research. In these texts, teaching is no longer connected to my prior experience, as was the case in earlier text sets. Instead, I describe my current teaching practices. I underline that I feel it is important to understand "the impact of my teaching on the learners with whom I am working." Further, in what might be considered resistance to institutional norms regarding the separation of research and teaching, I connect the two by describing myself as a "practitioner-researcher." Thus, I suggest that research serves teaching and that the stance of the researcher is one

that can be shared by teachers. Consequently, I counter the discourse of research as an intellectual pursuit that is exclusive to those in academic positions and distinct from the world of public education.

"There's Me, and Then There's Me"

Despite positioning myself as a practitioner-researcher in the final text set, I take a very different position in another document in the same set. That is, I provide a detailed description of my scholarly and professional activity for the previous two years. The list included titles for which I was a collaborative author, a chapter in an edited book, a peer-reviewed publication, multiple translations, and presentations. Therefore, in keeping with the evaluation committee's comments to better "represent myself" (to them), I demonstrated that I had met the institutional requirements. The result is that I made two distinct self-representations in the very same set of texts. One of the representations helps me secure success according to the institutional norms of academic work. The other representation, that I am a practitioner-researcher, is my "academic project of the self" (Clegg, 2008, p. 340).

The Self in the Spontaneous Writing

In the next section, I explore the 41 discontinuous fragments of thoughts and images that arose while I was working with the sets of formal documents. As Gannon (2006) indicates, such fragments are marked by contradiction. Additionally, there is no clear audience or purpose for the thoughts that came to mind unbidden, and the spontaneous writing that immediately followed was somewhat chaotic. An example of one passage is provided below. Dashes are used to show breaks and pseudonyms replace names.

> Struggle to let go of ministry – the impossibility of letting go – Nancy – you're still working for them – her distain – Libbey –I can't mentor you – what? mentor? OUF – sudden recognition of not really understanding what an academic identity/ job was.

Thirty-seven of the 41 passages of spontaneous writing include implicit or explicit reference to negative emotions. The most notable are fear and shame, experienced as a doctoral student or new academic appointee. In the passages, I am fearful of disappointing authoritative others, or shame-filled for having done so. Notably, the disappointment is not expressed by the others, but is interpreted by me as such. There is also the tension resulting from the recurrent shifts between the fear of being

invisible, the belief that self-promotion is necessary, the shame of self-promotion, and the fear of being considered fraudulent by those whose acknowledgment I seek. In most cases, I appear to be an outsider or am on the periphery. In contrast, positive emotions are implicit or explicit in only four of the 41 passages. One is connected to my prior work, and focuses on recognition I received for making a difference in the lives of others. The three remaining positive passages focus on moments in which I experienced increasing insider status with colleagues in the university context. In the case of the latter, membership is offered by others who have greater authority.

Inner and Outer Processes

I want to use the above analysis to illustrate that the process of identity formation needs to be better understood. My current positioning in the formal texts as more teacher than researcher and my resistance to the normative discourses of the academic world make it appear that I am confidently and purposefully situating myself outside of the context of performance and production where success is so elusive. But I am neither confident nor am I an outsider by choice, as the spontaneous writing shows. My fear runs high and my struggle for membership is painfully evident. Similar struggles for such membership are captured in the auto-ethnographies of Atkinson-Baldwyn (2009) and Humphreys (2005). In my case, securing both authenticity and success in higher education involves fostering a strong identification with the institutional role of teacher while simultaneously carrying out research as is required of an academic.

Clegg's (2008) study of academic identity provides insight into my resistance to the normative structures and discourses of the academic world. She explains, "that there is a complex dialectic between reflexivity and a deep sense of being-in-the-world, and that identities are not taken off and put back on again in some superficial way but are lived as deeply committed personal projects" (p. 336). I have been deeply committed to teaching throughout my career as teacher, practitioner-researcher, pedagogical consultant, and curriculum developer. In the public school classroom, the school board, and the ministry of education I experienced membership, recognition, and authority. Before taking a position in the university, my narrative was that I had "a life in education" marked by authenticity and success. Academic work has disrupted that narrative. My struggle to continue to live my personal

project and restore authenticity and success to my work is evident in the self-representations explored in this text.

Concluding Comments

Academic identity and the *becoming* process in higher education will be distinct to each individual given that prior experiences, investments, values, beliefs, and expectations of work in higher education differ from one person to another. While my own experience mirrors the struggles to secure success and membership described by Humphreys (2005) and Atkinson-Baldwyn (2009), the positions we take up are distinct.

Efforts can be made to mitigate the struggles of new academic appointees. Structured induction (Trowler & Knight, 2000), community building (Groen & Kawalilak, 2006), and opportunities for collaborative research (Tynan & Garbett, 2007) will contribute to making the path to tenure less painful and difficult. Significantly, these approaches depend on contexts where such partnering and relationships are possible; other measures are needed. However, additional measures may only become clear once we better understand how identity formation in higher education operates. Given the fact that academics at all levels are facing the demands of the increasingly performative culture (Archer, 2008), it is clearly time to focus on better understanding identity formation and its consequences for those who seek authenticity and success in higher education.

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Avril Aitken is an Associate Professor in the School of Education of Bishop's University. She did her undergraduate and graduate work at McGill and the University of Ottawa. Before working at Bishop's, Avril collaborated with school and school board teams from across the province of Quebec, on a range of initiatives connected to teacher professional development. Her research and publications focus on the formation of teacher identity and teacher leadership.

Author's Address:
2600 College St.
Sherbrooke, Quebec
CANADA J1M 1Z7
EMAIL: aaitken@ubishops.ca