

Ways of being an academic with working knowledge, emotions and notions of identity

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There has been little exploration of the affective aspects of academic work from the phenomenographic perspective, (cf Akerlind 2004, 2008, Martin & Leukenhausen 2005) a perspective that offers descriptions of experiences of phenomena by those experiencing it (Marton & Booth 1996). In this paper, emotions identified in academics' experiences of working knowledge – or knowledge put to work in day-to-day work – are reported and linked, though the topic of working knowledge, to notions of identity.

Academics' working knowledge was identified and described using phenomenographic approaches to the analysis of twenty semi structured interviews conducted with academics in an Australian university. Working knowledge includes consideration of not just 'doing', but also 'being' and brings together ideas of knowledge, learning, work and identity (Symes & McIntyre 2000). From the perspective of this phenomenographic investigation of the working knowledge of academics, notions of identity are implicated in emotions associated with different ways of being an academic with working knowledge. These emotions, ways of being an academic with working knowledge, and the notions of identity they raise are the focus of the discussion.

A critical feature of the discussion is the notion of the 'ideal' of being an academic - an abstract notion to which many of the interviewees referred. The analysis identified that the 'ideal' was a concept-signalled by emotions used to describe it- that was used by academics in the study to calibrate their practice and determine how to be an academic in the institutional context. An 'ideal' of academic work underpinned being an academic with working knowledge, irrespective of the complexity of the working knowledge overall, though its interpretation varied in light of perceptions of work in the institutional context. The constancy of this 'ideal' suggests support for the view that academics are maintaining traditional values and reinterpreting them in the face of forces that are eroding traditional practices and identities (Archer 2008, Clegg 2008, Sutherland & Taylor, 2011).

The analysis however, suggests variation in the ways that academics are maintaining traditional values and reinterpreting them. These appear to range from 'weak' and almost non-existent re interpretations at one end of a spectrum, to 'strong' and dynamic ones at the other. For example, being an academic with Fragmented working knowledge was not what was expected and was associated with emotions of confusion, anxiety and disillusionment about academic work. This was perceived as far from the 'ideal', and striving for it was postponed till sometime in the future or indefinitely. The notion of identity in this case reflects fragmentation of knowledge of practice, with a corresponding fragmentation of identity between the 'ideal' and how academics see themselves. Alternatively at the other end of the spectrum, being an academic with Integrated working knowledge identified perceptions of the 'ideal' as not only achievable but also open to reinterpretation and re shaping. This perception was associated with thoughtfulness, positivity, but also scepticism. The notion of identity suggested here is of alignment between the 'ideal' and the self, resulting in capacity to identify and positively respond to demands for changed practices. This is in sharp contrast to notions of identity suggested by working knowledge at the other end of the spectrum where limited capacity to respond positively to these demands is indicated.

The gradation in understandings of the 'ideal' and notions of identity between these two extremes suggest that re-interpretations of traditional values vary. The implications of this for understanding the emotional dimensions of how academics are responding to change are discussed.

References

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