Symposium title: From Temptation to Penance – Exploring the Dispositions of the Contemporary Academic

Convenors:

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In this symposium, we will encourage delegates to explore issues of identity through the frequently-shared vocabularies of academia and religion. Shadowy figures known as 'deans' and 'provosts' patrol common room and sacristy alike, and they may further be found stalking an ambiguous cloister. The University of Paris is rare in being able to trace its lineage directly back to an individual cathedral school; nevertheless, the emergence of places of 'higher thinking' from the sixth century onwards was bound with the Latin church through the centrality of monasteries in commercial and intellectual life. Most of the early universities fell under the aegis of Rome to some extent, and in northern Europe theology was placed at the heart of the emerging curriculum.

This heritage is evident in the vocabulary we use to describe officials in higher education. Institutions across the world retain this nomenclature: the dean, for example, was originally 'a leader of ten' (*decanus*) in a medieval monastery, with clerics organised into militaristic platoons for administrative purposes. Now the academic dean serves a similarly senior executive function. Further, the rector is the 'ruler', and the provost is 'set over' (*praepositus*) those beneath him.

Does the retention of this vocabulary call into question our freedom in our scholarly activity? Do the monastic robes of academe reinforce the deference of the medieval church? As a result, do our senior managers (literally) patronise us? What are the implications for our sense of identity? Taking the shared heritage of academia and religion as a starting point, we interrogate the often terrifying in-between space, the grey area, the ambiguity that encapsulates what it means to teach at university.

What would our students have us scream about? Are we screaming for redemption and forgiveness? Are we driven by temptation or striving for penance? Are we seeking absolution for our sins or merely for well-intended failure? John Dewey taught us that 'failure is not mere failure'. Rather, failure is instructive. Our arts-enriched approach will encourage delegates to explore examples of failure and engage in critical self-reflection, and to celebrate failure as an opportunity for learning. This will be a restorative space for discovery and surprise, in which we acknowledge the negative outcomes of our well-meant initiatives and have the bravery to share and apply the lessons learned. In this way, we can

look to utilise failure and view it as an essential part of the creative process (Matson, 1996) that turns theory into practice rather than cure it – and work towards a codified approach for analysing failure.

The symposium will be highly participative, providing opportunities for delegates to try out individual and group activities, discuss their experiences and identify ways of adapting them to their own context. We will examine the role of shape-shifting; experimentation in isolation and collect confessions in a 'black box' and use these as a metaphorical vehicle for reflection and systematic evaluation. We then draw on interdisciplinary sources as we weave religion, literature, creative arts and educational research, in particular the 'slipping, sliding and losing the way' (Pirrie & Macleod, 2010) that embodies our critical analysis and reflections on the fate of the academic today.

1. Shape-shifting

Grant (2007) suggests that in the face of contradictory and impossible demands the academic developer may become a 'light-footed shape shifter who slips around the cracks of our institutions.' This strand examines the notion of the shape-shifter in relation to the continuing professional development of university teachers. Engaging with images and writings about shape-shifters, participants will have the chance to explore the notion of shape-shifting in relation to academic identities, and to network across disciplines and institutions.

University lecturers are required to demonstrate that they are reflective practitioners, but many of us need help in initiating and sustaining meaningful reflection. One way of achieving this is by using arts-enriched reflective activities. This strand will allow delegates to experience and evaluate such activities, and hear how others have used arts-enriched reflection in their professional development activities. Delegates may also identify ways of using arts-enriched reflective activities in their own practice, and learn more about related theories.

Arts-enriched reflection reasserts the value of open-ended, exploratory development activities, and involves active engagement with collage, poetry, photography and other creative ways of prompting deep thinking about teaching practice and teacher identity. It has been used to promote the professional development of physicians (Rabow, 2003), inter-professional groups of health workers, nurses (Seymour, 1995; Marshall, 2003) and school teachers (Black, 2002). Working with university lecturers, Loads (2009; 2010) found that professional development workshops involving artwork and reflection provide a restorative space that allows for discovery and surprise, where lecturers can find meaning in their teaching practice.

It has been claimed that there is a lack of reflective spaces in our universities (Savin-Baden, 2008) and that development is at risk of being squeezed out by performativity – "narrow conceptions of usefulness that are articulated in terms of measurable performances" (Rowland, 2007: 10). Active engagement in arts-enriched reflective activities can offer an alternative. It also addresses the question of the relevance of the arts and humanities to professional development.

2. A black box for confessions

Our Scottish habitus urges us to begin with James Hogg's *Confessions of a Justified Sinner,* first published in 1824, whose portrayal of the danger of binary oppositions or 'split personalities' provides the ideal framework for our own quest. 'How delightful to think that a justified person can do no wrong! Who would not envy the liberty wherewith we are made free? Go to my husband, that poor unfortunate, blindfolded person, and open his eyes to his degenerate and sinful state; for well are you fitted to the task' (Hogg, 1999: 13).

A black box acts as a space for 'confessions' (and 'extra-ordinary tales'). Participants will be asked to submit an anonymous note briefly describing a mistake, failure or critical incident that they have experienced as university teachers, but may never have dared to 'confess' to anybody. The black box will act as a safe place for confessions, and will be (in an aero-mechanical sense) a source of information when something has gone wrong. This will create space for reflection and contemplation as well as systematic evaluation and improvement, acknowledging that we learn much from mistakes/failure.

This process will allow participants to delve into the grey, uncanny in-between spaces of the academy, to identify fears and the unfamiliar landscape that teaching can create, and to explore the notion of learning as a simultaneous loss and gain, the paradox of split personalities as researchers and teachers and issues of power balance. To whom can we 'confess' our sins without fear of repercussions? And who will provide absolution (Foucault, 1998; Wolff, 1950)?

Based on the collated confessions, we will invite participants to 'slip, slide and lose the way' (Pirrie & Macleod, 2010) in a discussion of the thrills and the perils of teaching in universities; of good versus evil; of what is 'justified' or 'justifiable' in academia; the notion of academic freedom and liberty; teaching as somehow helping to 'see', to enlighten students; and the transformative aspect of teaching that 'opens [their] eyes to [their] degenerate and sinful state' (Hogg, 1999: 13).

The discussion will offer an opportunity to face the fear of failure, judgement and repercussion. By entering 'purgatory' after 'confessing our sins' and crafting our own artworks, our 'monsters' and/or 'multiple identities', we can celebrate the feeling of

'release' and learn from the insights that are achieved through sharing pain and through contemplation, in the sense of 'a safe and holy place'.

3. Experimentation in isolation

For many academics, research is a 'safe space'. Our research is conducted in the field in which we have received almost all of our tertiary training. It is the space in which we are acknowledged experts. Our passion for this work is generally the reason we enter and remain inside the academy.

Teaching, by contrast, is a far more precarious experience. Where a 'research problem' is something to be discussed and even celebrated, a 'teaching problem' can more often feel like a reason for self-admonishment. Teaching, for many, is the academic wilderness. In our research we reflect, evaluate and innovate systematically, but can we claim to apply the same processes to our teaching?

And yet, it is often the terror and despair inherent in the wilderness that pushes us forwards. It is here that we are forced to experiment, to determine what works and what does not, and to return wiser and stronger. It is in these secluded 'hermitic' enclosures, in being 'in Klausur' (in contemplation), where innovation happens.

Now, the concept of 'the wilderness' is popularly celebrated and, in the natural environment, even protected in the face of unending urbanisation. This romantic viewpoint on our relationship with the world around us imbues wilderness with awe, beauty and intrinsic value; as the longed-for safe space for contemplation and personal recuperation. There now even exists the practice of 'wilderness therapy', in which outdoor survival tasks guide participants towards self-reliance and self-respect. Indeed, our own academic wilderness could be considered a valuable 20-mile zone in which to scream.

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