Chapter 13
From Professional Expert to Novice Academic: Challenges and Complexities

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ABSTRACT

The move from a professional career into academia involves a transition from professional expertise to novice academic. New academics encounter a number of university expectations that can challenge their own sense of professional identity. In this chapter, the author overviews the complexity of the higher education environment and highlights the challenges that new academics face. The status of being both a recognized professional and a novice in academia can be a unique experience, as the author documents.

INTRODUCTION

New academics in higher education are required to learn the role, as well as identify how to operate within the structure of the university environment. A strong awareness of the external higher education environment is valuable when new academics encounter and interact with present academics in situ. It is in this internal environment where academic identity is formed and reinforced (Beijard, Meijer & Verloop, 2004). An understanding of these internal and external expectations is central to how new academics develop their skills and knowledge. However, what appears to be a constant, for both the academic and the academy, is change.

Universities are complex organizations (Archer, 2008; Cantwell & Scevak, 2010; Fitzmaurice, 2013). Across almost three decades, marketization has been an external force that has shaped how universities are governed and managed (Malik, 2012). Archer (2008), for example, talks of a “Golden Age” in academia; a vision of bygone days and a time when there was not the same intensity of focus on income generation, but also more limited curricula and little or no use of technologies (Landers, 1995). A recent report published by the Council for the Defense of British Universities (CDBU) identified the tensions apparent between the purposes of the university and its role as a knowledge producer (Malik, 2012). A consequence of this tension is that aca-
demics are expected to contribute to the business of the university, producing knowledge, but in a marketized environment they are then subject to audits, to determine what knowledge is produced and how it counts.

The higher education sector now resembles a business environment (Austin, 2010) in which there is a clearly defined bureaucracy (Petersen, 2011) and a focus on outputs and accountability. This is the “neo-liberal enterprise” environment (Boyd & Horstmanshof, 2013, p.74), that demands efficiency, transparency, quality and public attention to outputs (Henkel, 2002). It is in this competitive and pressurized environment that academic identity is shaped, formed and institutionalized (Henkel, 2002). This is the web of pressures that I face as a new academic, encountering the academy and attempting to shape my own values, beliefs and agenda (Henkel, 2002).

An underpinning assumption prevalent in the literature (Austin, 2010; Petersen, 2011) is that those who take up their first academic positions are novices. Certainly in fields and disciplines such as education, law, commerce, and health sciences, staff are drawn from professional practice into higher education. For the most part, these staff move from being experts in their professional fields to novices in academia. But this does not necessarily mean they immediately know and understand a new field of work. In many ways they face cultural shocks as they move from expert to novice. There is awareness that with expert experience they are not entirely novices. What then are the specific challenges they encounter?

In this chapter, I trace a move into the academy. I do this with the vision of a new entrant into academia who has expertise in a professional field, that is, secondary (elementary) teaching. This chapter incorporates my personal view of this experience and includes commentary about this transition and the changes encountered. Change is intrinsically difficult and fraught with challenges and complexities. I explore key areas that mark academic work: the position description that sets out the role of an academic, the work requirements, hidden expectations and finally, I unpack what this means for a new academic and the development of academic identity.

At first glance the expectations of an academic workplace are interpreted through the position description. This description provides only an inkling of the university’s expectations of a new academic. In fact, the specific duties contain statements that give little sense of the depth of skills required for a new academic or that they will be constantly subject to surveillance and monitoring of output and performance. Once appointed, the active components of academic work combine to form workload, which is where further difficulties emerge. This shows the myriad expectations new academics face and the shifting identity of professional expert and academic novice. To contend with academic demands necessitates a search for support and guidance. In this search, the social capital of the higher education site, where experienced colleagues act as mentors, is typically conducive for a new academic to find their way. To develop an academic identity in this new environment requires engagement with the resident culture (Boyd & Horstmanshof, 2013). This chapter demonstrates the challenges encountered in the first years of being an academic, but is written from the perspective of one who has recently undergone this field change.

Moving into the Academy

There are many reasons why professionals decide on a career change and move into the academy. In numerous instances, this decision can be related to the desire to work in a different environment that is aligned with intellectual interests and offers a degree of organizational flexibility (Austin, 2010). However, it might also be the case that a career change brings about a negative change in salary compared to private industry (Austin, 2010; Petersen, 2011) – in higher education in particular. There is a range of personal and altruistic reasons