Supporting and developing teaching-focused individuals to professorial level – career progression across boundaries

Julie A. Hulme, Reader in Psychology, Keele University

Introduction

Most universities employ some academic staff on teaching-focused contracts. Traditionally, many such staff were employed on a part-time, fixed-term basis, with sessional teaching being delivered by visiting professionals (from health or industry, for example), or by early career academics. With the advent of metrics-based institutional ranking schemes internationally, there has been a trend for higher education institutions to employ substantive, permanent academics on education-focused contracts, with a view to providing a pedagogically expert work force to enhance education within departments and across institutions. This has led to the development of educational career pathways with opportunities for promotion to senior academic roles. Most of these promotion schemes recognise integrated teaching, scholarship and professional practice careers, but the sector has been slow to set clear criteria for a successful education-focused academic career. The newness of such pathways means that there is a shortage of educationally-focused senior staff to provide role models and mentoring (McHanwell and Robson, 2018). Thus academic identity is problematised, while support is limited. In this chapter, I explore some of the theoretical issues underpinning these challenges, and I will reflect on my own experiences to provide an illustrative case study. We will consider the importance of evaluating and reporting educational impact, and the role of a community-led network, Professors in Preparation, in developing ways forward for teaching-focused staff.

Literature Review

The number of academic staff in UK Higher Education has increased steadily since 2012, and the proportion of academic colleagues employed on education-focused contracts (in contrast to education and research contracts) has increased concurrently (Locke et al., 2016). In 2017/18, 29% of all academic staff were employed on teaching-only contracts, while 47% were employed for both teaching and research (HESA, 2019). The numbers of staff working on education-focused career pathways exceed 61,000 individuals, and the need to provide clear promotion pathways, and systems of reward and recognition, for this substantive and important group cannot be underestimated. Cashmore et al. (2013) noted that the proportion of universities offering promotion schemes for education-focused academics had increased over recent years, and this trend has continued; however, promotion rates are still relatively low, and promotions panels are largely comprised of research-active academics who do not necessarily appreciate the distinctive nature of scholarship in comparison to research (McHanwell and Robson, 2018). Implementation of existing reward and recognition pathways is still lacking, and a perception of a lack of parity between research-focused and education-focused careers persists.

In common with many professional staff, or ‘pracademics’ (practice-focused academics), education-focused academics are often employed to “assist universities to transform in order to withstand economic and societal pressures…” (Vele et al., 2019). Specifically, modern universities are striving to improve their league table positions, through enhancing teaching-related metrics such as student attainment, inclusion, satisfaction and graduate employability. Leading effective educational change requires educational expertise (e.g. Nelson and Campbell, 2017; Fung, 2017; Gorard, 2020), and educational expertise is more likely to be located in those who choose to study it than it is in traditional discipline-specific researchers. Thus education-focused academics are frequently “positive disruptors” (Akerman, 2020). This has increasingly been demonstrated during the shift to online learning during the recent coronavirus pandemic, when teaching-focused academics alongside educational developers and learning technologists have led the way in supporting colleagues and students to make the transition. However, in comparison to research, this expertise can be undervalued, acting as a source of “invisibility”, and a feeling of being “not as good” as research-focused academics, and so of imposter syndrome (as described in professional staff by Akerman, 2020).

According to social identity theory (a well-established psychological theory of identity proposed by Tajfel and Turner, 1979), our identity is influenced by the way we view ourselves relative to those around us. This theoretical framework proposes that we evaluate ourselves in the context of people like ourselves (the ‘in-group’), who are seen as having positive attributes, and people who differ from us (the ‘out-group), who are seen as having negative attributes. Education-focused academics can feel that they cannot compete in terms of traditional research success, and thus compare unfavourably to the ‘stereotypical’ ‘successful’ academic. There is a very real risk that they will perceive themselves as being “not as good”, but also that they experience a lack of belonging to the academy. Alongside consequences for mental health and wellbeing, there is a risk of lower performance, and ultimately a self-fulfilling prophecy of failure (e.g. Randel et al., 2018).

In reality, of course, the social comparison here is problematic, because research success is not part of the role of an education-focused academic. However, while the academy continues to celebrate research, and education-focused academics undertake service to their students and their colleagues, the latter will remain largely invisible. From a social identity theory perspective, we must either choose to divert to the traditional research-active pathway, or to allow ourselves to identify as ‘different’, in order to belong. However, there is a third option, to create a visible community of education-focused academics, to form a new in-group for those who do not conform to the ‘researcher’ stereotype. This requires us individually to recognise and acknowledge our differences, to find others who share similar values and working roles, and to form a new ‘tribe’ (Becher and Trowler, 2001), based around educational perspectives rather than academic discipline (see Hulme, 2019a, for a personal reflection). We must network with those in the wider community, both within and beyond our own universities, to establish new norms. Often, these networks include those recognised as third spaces, including educational developers, student support professionals, and learning technology experts, who have much in common with the teaching-focused academic. Organisationally, universities need to provide opportunities for networking, and to support the development of a learning community around education and scholarship (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

Developing a learning community around educational scholarship first means that the higher education sector needs a clear vision of scholarship, while the concept is still disputed in the literature. Several models exist, with perhaps the most widely recognised being Boyer's (1990) model, illustrated in Figure One, which links research (or 'discovery') with the integration and application of knowledge, and the scholarship of teaching. In this context, pedagogic research becomes valued as 'discovery', and many university promotion schemes substitute traditional discipline research for pedagogic research in an attempt to include education-focused academics. However, this approach to promotion can alienate educational scholars (e.g. Bessant and Robinson, 2018), and fails to recognise that funding for educational research is scarce, and that educational outputs can be much more diverse than publication in high-impact factor journals. As for pracademics, meaningful outputs for teaching-focused academics are those that impact on practice, in this case educational practice, rather than generating new knowledge and traditional research impact case studies.

[Figure One about here]

In contrast, a large body of literature exists around the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SOTL; Fanghanel et al., 2016). Here: "*An act of intelligence or artistic creation becomes scholarship when it possess at least three attributes: it becomes public, it becomes an object of critical review and evaluation by members of one's own community, and members of one's own community begin to use, build upon, and develop those acts of mind and creation*" (Shulman, 1999). In other words, effective SOTL is disseminated, peer-reviewed, and is applied and developed by others. This resonates with university promotions criteria that focus on reach (how far does the work travel within the Higher Education community?); impact (what difference did the work make to students and educators?); and leadership (to what extent is the scholar able to influence others to apply the work?). For example, it may be possible for someone to share an open educational resource, which is then widely adopted within their discipline community, and which genuinely contributes to student learning across the sector (as evidenced by rigorous evaluation). This shifts the narrative of value of scholarship away from traditional research metrics, and towards evidence that can be captured and measured objectively. SOTL is not without its critics, but this model of rewarding educational scholarship is prevalent in universities which are working towards a more inclusive promotion model (HEA, 2013).

Reflective Discussion

My own career trajectory has been something of a 'long and winding road', and ultimately shaped my current role as a joint third-space practitioner and academic, combining teaching and educational leadership with academic development and coaching. Having studied for a BSc in Biology and Psychology, and a PhD in Neuroscience, as a mature, first-in-family university student, I developed a love of teaching, and started to draw upon my own experiences as a student to understand what helped my students to learn, and what made my teaching effective for diverse learners. In turn, this led me to several psychology departments, where I started to develop expertise in pedagogy, and to recognise that I could apply my psychological knowledge to those questions. I moved to the (then) Higher Education Academy (HEA), as the Discipline Lead for Psychology, and discovered the joys of academic development and change management. I left the HEA to take up a Senior Teaching Fellow

role in the School of Psychology at Keele University, where I was employed specifically to lead positive educational change – to be one of Akerman's (2020) "positive disruptors".

At this stage, I was a Principal Fellow of the HEA (PFHEA), and was keen to gain a promotion. I had a strong national profile, and was quick to apply my experience and knowledge to make a difference at Keele, both within and beyond my own department. The University had a pathway for promotion for those in the Teaching Fellow job family, and I sought approval to apply from my (then) Head of School. A traditional researcher, he was not familiar with measures of quality of scholarship; he looked at my CV, and declared me 'not quite there yet'. I persisted, he agreed to support my application, and I was successful in achieving a Readership, based on evidence of impact, reach and leadership around my national work in developing psychology education. My impact on the practice of others, through practice-focused publications and academic development, and on the UK policy framework around psychology education, was key to this recognition. However, I quickly discovered following promotion that there was a further issue, having been told by several colleagues that I was "not a real Reader" ("not as good"), on the grounds of my teaching-focused terms of employment.

My own career continued to develop, as I gained a National Teaching Fellowship (NTF), was awarded the first education-focused sabbatical at Keele, and furthered my profile as a leading scholar of both inclusive education and psychology education. However, the "not as good" label remains a constant challenge that I encounter frequently in supporting junior colleagues starting out on this career pathway. Within my own university, I now lead a psychology-specific scholarship group, to support these colleagues, and chair a university-wide network for educational scholarship; I am determined to create a strong learning community of educational scholars, in which we can find our 'tribe'. Psychologically, there could be a risk of re-inforcing the identity of educational scholars as 'other', different from other academics. Instead the groups serve as an empowering community, providing mutual support and coaching to fulfil our roles as 'positive disruptors', while providing a secure base to which we can return. Other third space professionals are welcomed, allowing a developing sense of shared identity and common purpose.

On a sector-wide level, in 2018, separate discussions on both the PFHEA and NTF mailing lists made me realise just how common this perception was. Large numbers of PFHEAs and NTFs were asking the question: "How can I use this recognition from the sector to become a professor?" It was clear that this group of leading-light educators was not being supported through promotion within their own institutions. I found a kindred spirit in (then Dr, now Professor) Deborah Lock from the University of Lincoln (see chapter X in this book), and we established a network for people on education- or professional-practice-focused career pathways. The network became the Professors in Preparation community, or ProfsInPrep, and was given an online home on the OneHE platform. We hosted a number of events, webinars, and were invited to speak at conferences (one of which led to our contributions to this book). We grew quickly (now with over 200 members and associates), and were supported by the Association of NTFs. Professors Liz Mossop (Lincoln) and Sally Brown (emerita, Leeds Beckett) initiated a mentoring community, and we started to collect case studies from those who had already been successful in joining the professoriate via educational pathways. ProfsInPrep was developed to create a cross-sector community learning network, providing peer support, and to create a pipeline, or a virtuous circle, whereby those who succeeded

could support those who aspired to senior-level promotions. The network has been successful beyond our wildest hopes, and we have celebrated a number of promotions. We have also guided those who were unsuccessful on their first attempt to improve their evidence of reach, impact, and leadership for future promotions claims. Perhaps most excitingly, we have worked with universities, to inform their promotions criteria and selection processes, and to support education-focused staff to engage with their promotions schemes. We hope that our work is helping to create organisational change, not least through increasing the numbers of senior education-focused academics in each institution.

I am now striving for promotion to professor myself, drawing upon the support of like-minded colleagues, and the reach, impact and leadership that I have shown through my community-building activities, such as ProfsInPrep, will form a core part of my case. One challenge lies in gaining recognition of the value of positive disruption at institutional level, and in attaining institutional roles, despite recognition externally. As such, my personal experiences reinforce my views of educational expertise as undervalued in the traditional academy. I firmly believe that for education-focused colleagues to succeed, we need to change institutional culture, by supporting third space professionals and teaching-focused academics to achieve institutional positions in which they can have influence. I sincerely hope that in supporting those collegiate individuals who thrive on providing evidence-based education, we can create more role models and mentors, for those at the beginning of their careers. In so doing, through ProfsInPrep, we aspire to change the stereotype of the 'successful' academic and professor, and create a higher education sector in which educational scholarship is prized and celebrated (Hulme and Lock, 2020).

Conclusion (300-500)

The higher education sector has a long tradition of rewarding and recognising discipline-focused research, and particularly research that is associated with large grants and high-impact publications. For education-focused academics, this can be an environment in which a sense of belonging is hard to achieve, and in which a lack of role models and mentors can create significant challenges around gaining reward, recognition and promotion. As I have argued elsewhere (Hulme, 2019b), promotions systems in academia can seem to reward individualism, and to penalise those who 'serve' their students, colleagues and institutions. However, a culture of academic kindness, built from within the education-focused academic community, is required to bring about transformation to our institutions. The concept of compassionate leadership has been previously applied to supporting more women to succeed and meet their aspirations in the academic environment (Waddington, 2016; MacFarlane and Burg, 2019; Hulme and Lock, 2020). There is evidence to suggest that a compassionate academic environment contributes to productivity and performance, as well as wellbeing (Holliman et al., 2019), which serves the institution as well as the individual. The first step is to identify, support, and be supported by our 'tribe' of fellow education-focused academics; together, we can influence and 'positively disrupt' our universities, calling for respect for education and scholarship, and for those who deliver them, on an equal basis to traditional research.

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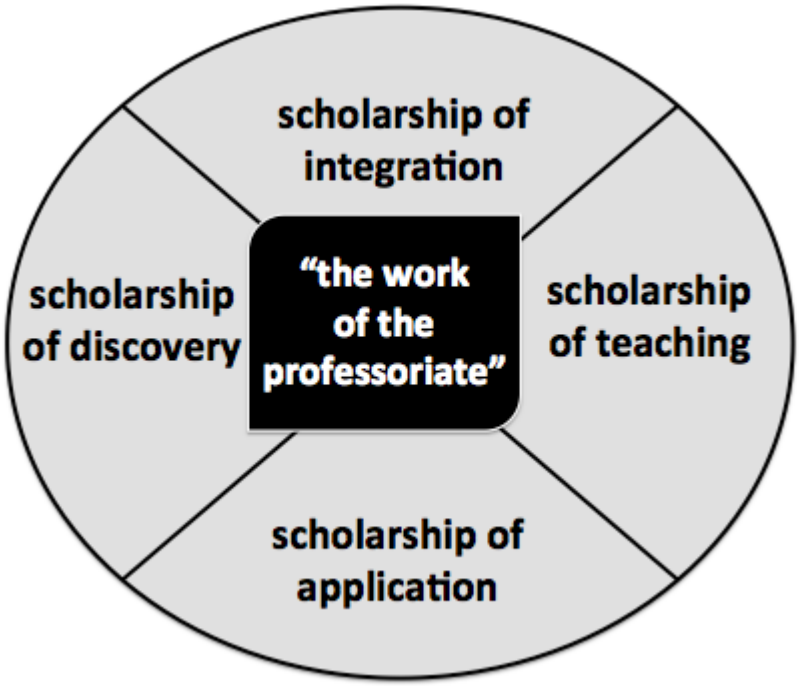
Figure One: Boyer's (1990) conceptualization of the nature of scholarship.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