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Poetic Transcription: An Option in Supporting the Early Career Academic?

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ABSTRACT

This on the horizon paper concerns early career academics and their developing roles in the context of a focus on transitions into higher education. Despite a purported dearth of data in respect of the early career academic, it suggests that challenges faced by such individuals centre on the development of identity, agency and community. Two theoretical perspectives – resilience and liminality – are outlined and used to suggest that whilst the transition into role will be disruptive, such an experience does not have to be damaging; indeed, well managed, it might enable individuals to flourish. Poetic transcription as a research method is introduced and then re-presented with a twist to illustrate its potential to support the early career academic as an individual and as a member of community of practice. Plans for a small-scale action research project are outlined to investigate the potential of poetic transcription with a twist to strengthen resilience and negotiate liminality.

Keywords: early career academic; resilience; liminality; poetic transcription with a twist

Introduction

The topic of transition in the context of Higher Education will be reinvigorated by its selection as the next Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Scotland Enhancement Theme with activity due to commence in autumn 2014. Previous reports, such as that prepared by Whittaker (2008), will likely direct attention towards the need for a strategic and co-ordinated approach to the management of transition, which shifts focus from retention and withdrawal to student engagement and empowerment. As welcome as it is, less clear, at this point, is the extent to which the subject of transition and the enhancement of current practice will extend to embrace means by which early career academics are enabled to find their place in the academic milieu so that they, too, can thrive as individuals and also as lecturers, confident and skilled in working collaboratively with students. Interestingly, Sutherland and Taylor (2011, p. 183) argue that early career academics are both “ill-defined and under-researched” as a group; however, they go on to suggest that challenges faced centre on the development of “identity, agency and community”, three constructs which they propose create complexity in the lived experience of new staff members. It is an interrelationship further explained by the analysis that “the formation of an academic identity, and the sense of agency that motivates the academics to live and develop that identity” is culturally mediated in the community of the workplace (Sutherland & Taylor, 2011, p. 185). A range of writers would appear to agree; for example, see Cox (2013), Findlow (2011), Loads (2010), and Remmik, Karm, Haamer and Lepp (2011). It seems that the journey into the space of higher education can be as troublesome for academic staff as it is for some students, with a number of possible consequences, including the loss of talent because of the decision to leave. However, not all early career academics who struggle with their transition into role will make such a choice, electing instead to stay, with potential negative impact on themselves, the student body and the organisation as a whole. Not surprising then that there is investment in early career academics both formally, for example, via structured induction programmes and accredited programmes of study, and more informally, through mentoring and peer observation/review. Just as Whittaker (2008) advocated the need to tailor the approach to student transition in response to the increasing diversity of the student body, it is possible that support for the early career academic also requires to be personalised. This paper suggests one possibility which might be added to the armoury of options available, namely poetic transcription with a twist. Prior to its overview, consideration of two theoretical perspectives – resilience and liminality – is provided because of the potential of both to ground the possibility afforded by the use of poetic form in the support of the early career academic.

Theoretical perspectives

Particular standpoints in the development psychology literature make clear the significance of trust and belonging, two factors which are argued to strengthen the individual’s sense of self and their capacity to adapt and thrive in the face of adversity (Berk, 2012). The ability of the individual to be resilient in less than ideal circumstances has been the subject of considerable investigation with a focus

on children and their mental health (Fox, 2010); however, the work of Gilligan (1997, as cited in Fox, 2010) suggests the utility of the construct when considering the early career academic and the challenges they might face. Specifically, Gilligan (1997, as cited in Fox, 2010) identifies three building blocks of resilience (see Figure 1) and six domains which contribute to their strength (see Figure 2).

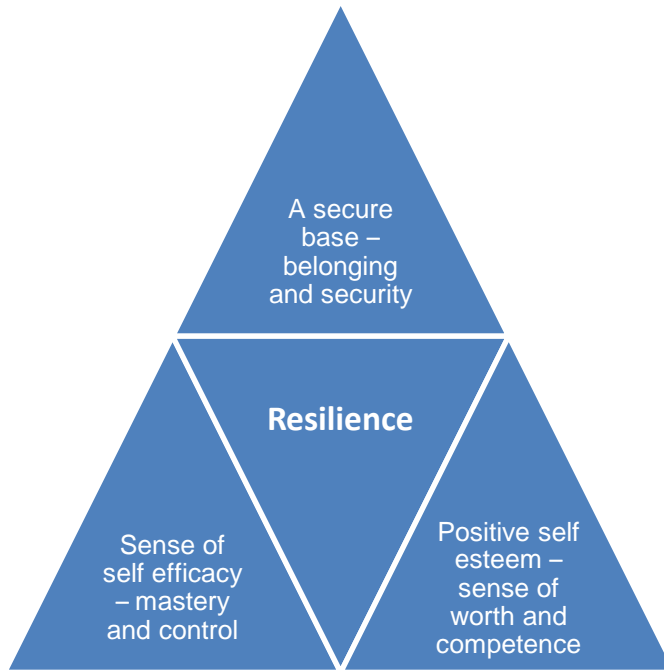


Figure 1 Three building blocks of resilience (after Gilligan 1997)



Figure 2 The six domains contributing to the building blocks of resilience (after Gilligan 1997)

Although it might be tempting to discount Gilligan’s (1997, as cited in Fox, 2010) thinking because it originates with children and their wellbeing, it is not hard to see the connection to the early career academic’s struggle with identity, agency and community (see Figure 1). It is also possible to consider the means by which resilience might be bolstered within the adult population, specifically the

early career academic, so they are enabled to belong, moving from the position of outsider to a place more in the circle of academic life (see Figure 2). For sure, Gilligan's thinking would seem to emphasise the importance of socio-cultural practices within the organisation which might assist the individual to negotiate their transition in a way which nurtures the development of identity, agency and community. However, the second theoretical perspective – liminality – guards against the assumption that the process of entering the academic milieu as a lecturer can be made unproblematic, so that the movement, the change of place, goes unnoticed. La Shure (2005) explains the inevitability of the disruptive influence of the liminal state by equating it with a rite of passage, first described in this context by Van Gennep (1909, as cited in La Shure, 2005). Put another way, taking up a new role follows on from being divested of the role that came before and entering the liminal, 'betwixt and between' state (La Shure, 2005). It is an idea explored further by Bosetti, Kawalilak and Patterson (2008), who recognise that without attention to the experience of liminality, anxiety, confusion and a sense of incompetence may be the outcome for the individual initiate. Equally, Bosetti et al. (2008) insist that it might be a state within which the individual flourishes, if the organisation plans for it. It seems that the trap would be to ignore liminality and, in so doing, miss the opportunity to work positively with the disruption that inevitably accompanies change.

With these two constructs – resilience and liminality – in mind, this paper now moves to explain poetic transcription, first as a method of working with research data and second, adapted to become a tool facilitating the structured review of experience, thereby constituting the twist.

Poetic transcription as a method

Glesne (1997) describes poetic transcription as a form of creative writing used in the context of ethnographic enquiry. Citing Richardson (1992, 1994), Glesne (1997) explains her particular use of the method, which involved transforming interview transcripts into poetic form. Acknowledging that there are no actual "rules" for the process, Glesne (1997) makes clear that at the heart of the method is the transcript which the researcher works on to turn it into something else, in so doing creating a different voice. Unlike more traditional forms of working with qualitative data which break up what was said into "component parts, imposing a researcher-perceived order on things", requiring "data reduction and the segregation of thoughts", Glesne (1997, p. 206) maintains that whilst poetic transcription is "filtered through the researcher" and does involve word reduction, it "illuminates the wholeness and interconnections of thoughts", enabling the essence, hues and textures to be represented.

Amongst others, Jones (2010) has taken the method into the higher education setting, in her case to examine academic life and its conceptualisation. Quoting McBride (2009, p. 43), Jones (2010) argues the power of poetry because: "It questions, it leaves frayed edges and loose wires. It draws out the hidden, the spiritual, the underlying rhythms of life that we swamp with information, noise and noise channels".

Having previously used other methods of working with interview data, Jones (2010) maintains that the conversion of what people in her study said into poetic form enabled teaching to be better understood in its richness, subtlety and passion. Similar to Glesne (1997), Jones (2010, p. 593) interviewed the participants, transcribed the data in full and then retold an "extended chunk of text", removing "digressions and repetitions, but only using the participant's words", retaining the chronological order and logic of the original transcript. In essence, the output – the poem – is not collaborative but rather the researcher's interpretation of "meaning, emphasis, rhythm and nuance" (Jones, 2010, p. 593).

Using poetic transcription with a twist to review experience

By chance, I heard Anna Jones speak about poetic transcription at a conference at which she gave a paper, illustrating the method. I was fascinated by what she shared and had an idea. In brief, I am a member of a team which facilitates formal academic induction for new members of lecturing staff. Two days are set aside for the induction, separated in time by nine months or so. The second of the sessions is organised around critical incidents provided by the participants in advance, knowing they will be used to focus discussions. I wondered whether the critical incident that had been assigned to me to use with the group of participants might be retold using poetic transcription and shared my thinking with my colleagues at the pre-induction day planning meeting. We agreed to run with the idea, using very clear guidelines which I had prepared. In short, having made explicit the imperative to respect the author of the critical incident and their story, the participants were to be asked to work on their own, taking twenty minutes to retell the incident, ahead of presenting their poem to the group by reading it out. The rules were that whilst words could be removed, none could be added, and the chronology needed to be maintained. Punctuation was allowed to create emphasis, and a title for the poem was required. Everyone took part, including the four members of the team, which was followed by a discussion on whether the use of a different way of reviewing experience, that is, one which was both individual and collaborative because it invited all participants to focus on one critical incident, to retell it and to then share it with the group, was useful. Feedback was almost wholly positive, not least from the author of the incident, who spoke about experiencing the support of the group in respect of an incident which had left her unsure about her practice. Another participant explained that the use of poetic transcription had made her get inside the experience of her colleague and stopped her trying to interpret it from the outside, by adding in her thoughts and feelings.

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On reflection, it seemed that poetic transcription with a twist (in that it was employed differently to the method applied in research enquiries) may have the potential to create conversations in respect of early career academics' lived experience and could offer a means to draw individuals into their own community of practice, bolstering their resilience and assisting in the negotiation of the transition through the 'betwixt and between' liminal state. I took these ideas to the Scottish Higher Education Development Group Annual Residential in June 2014 and invited colleagues to take part in a similar process to that described above. Again, feedback was positive, although there was caution in respect of whether poetic transcription with the twist, as described, would appeal to early career academics from all subject disciplines. There was also some discussion about risk, in that the process invites emotion into the review of experience. It was felt by some that enabling this could be scary. Subsequent reflection on both points suggests the need to leave all possibilities open to all individuals who are in the early career phase of their academic life and, in so doing, enable people to work with, rather than avoid the risk that might come with, exploring emotion. This is not to say that poetic transcription with a twist does not need ground rules, but this is likely true of any approach designed to promote the development of identity, agency and community.

Next steps?

The plan is to design a small-scale action research project which will enable poetic transcription with a twist to be used with a cross-disciplinary group of early career academics with a view to better understanding if, and how, it might support their development as individuals, as a peer group and as members of academic staff. The aim of the research will be to evaluate the potential of poetic transcription with a twist in facilitating an exploration of the experience of liminality with the intention of cultivating resilience.

Conclusion

Whilst it may be, as Sutherland and Taylor (2011) argue, that early career academics are ill-defined as a group and under-researched, there is a body of evidence which indicates that their transition into role can be difficult, with negative consequences for them as individuals, the student body and the organisation itself. Bolstering their resilience in the face of the change that comes with the territory of the liminal state would seem an essential dimension of available support. Whilst there is no attempt to argue that poetic transcription with a twist is the answer, it presents as an option worth further exploration. Alongside other possibilities, it might serve to assist in the early career development of new academics so their experience is less painful, less isolating, enabling, in turn, their sense of identity, agency and community to thrive.

Biography

Dr Fiona Smart is a member of the Academic Strategy and Practice at Edinburgh Napier (ASPEN) team. Her interest in the development of early career academics is longstanding and results from experience gained as a colleague, mentor and senior manager. Discovering the potential of poetic transcription connects with Fiona's love of poetry as a means of self-expression.

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