Academic work in transition: Hidden stories of academic identities

Author(s): Churchman, Deborah
Occupation Lecturer
Affiliation School of Management, University of South Australia
Contact information of the author(s): School of Management, City West campus, University of South Australia. GPO Box 2471, Adelaide, SA 5001, Australia
Email: debrah.churchman@unisa.edu.au

Author(s): King, Sharron
Occupation Lecturer
Affiliation School of Health Sciences, University of South Australia
Contact information of the author(s): School of Health Sciences, City East campus, University of South Australia. GPO Box 2471, Adelaide, SA 5001, Australia
Email: sharron.king@unisa.edu.au

Biography of the author(s)
Dr. Deborah Churchman has worked at the University of South Australia as a lecturer in management and organizational communication since 1991, following a diverse career in business and higher education in Australia and the United Kingdom. Her research interests include sensemaking and communities of practice, particularly in regard to the changing roles of academics in Australian universities.

Dr. Sharron King has worked at the University of South Australia since 1991 as a lecturer in Health Sciences and more recently as an academic developer in research education in the Flexible Learning Centre. Her research interests broadly focus on teaching and learning issues for both academics and students in the higher education sector, with particular emphasis on the emotional dimension of educational change.

Abstract
Academic work is becoming increasingly restrictive and controlled as tertiary institutions move towards a more corporate managerialistic mode of operating. This paper uses a narrative lens to explore the ways in which academic staff make sense of this new environment. In particular, it compares academic staff’s stories of their worklife with the official organization-representative stories promulgated by the university. The study examines the choices academic staff make when the corporate stories no longer reflect their views of work, institution or personal values. Data gathered during a world café event depicts two constructions of academic identity and compares these often hidden stories with the cover stories provided by the university. The paper concludes by addressing some of the concerns inherent in the loss of plurality that occurs when tertiary institutions move towards an homogenized environment.

Keywords
Identity, academic work, sensemaking, higher education.
Introduction
This paper explores the ways that academic staff make sense of the recent changes to their work practices, which call into question their workplace identity. Identity perspectives focus on members’ understanding of ‘who they are’ and the ways in which this influences, and is influenced by, what they do at work. Through a narrative lens, this understanding is expressed as stories which reflect the worker as a character in their workplace landscape. These stories are constructed within a context and, in the case of tertiary institutions, this is an increasingly restrictive and controlled context with an unprecedented rate of change (Marginson 2000). As the university environment moves toward a new corporate/commercial form, places for the stories reflecting a time of more autonomy for academic staff may no longer reflect the new context.

Academic institutions have provided new language and new stories which academic staff can adopt to help them to make sense of the new context and their place in it. These stories refer to characters to be emulated, called by participants of this study ‘gold class academics’, and activities to be pursued and valued. These stories, authorised by management, are not necessarily adopted by academic staff as self-representative but they can be used as cover stories¹, that is, stories to be used in official capacities. These stories do not, however, reflect many of the expectations, previous experiences and values of academic staff (Churchman 2004; King 2007). Adopting them as self-representational would mean, for many academic staff, the jettisoning of values which are integral to their academic work.

This study explores the hidden stories of academic staff and the ways in which they are created and perpetuated in the changing academic context. The authors first describe the changes which have influenced the academic profession as a background for the following discussion on the ways in which academic staff make sense of these emerging conditions. Data gathered during a world café seminar event was used to compose two stories which were shared by academic staff as representing their academic identities. This is compared to the cover stories provided by the university. The paper concludes by addressing some of the concerns inherent in disregarding the multiple stories by which academic staff live.

Academic profession
There are a number of studies which highlight the levels of dissatisfaction and stress among academic staff, together with other staffing concerns for academic institutions. With the declining attraction of the profession and the aging workforce, there will be a major shortfall of academic staff in the English-speaking world over the next decade which could make it more difficult for Australian universities to recruit staff (Hugo 2005). Australian federal government sponsored studies attribute this to academic salaries being relatively uncompetitive with comparable private sector salaries in Australia and some overseas academic salaries (Horsley, Martin & Woodburne 2005). It is likely that other factors have contributed in making academic careers less attractive. For example, there is ample evidence of increasing stress associated with the role (Gillespie, Walsh, Winefield, Dua, & Stough 2001) and reduced opportunities for creativity and autonomy (Bathmaker & Avis 2005).

Significant shifts in the tertiary sector in general are likely to exacerbate these problems rather than facilitate any resolution of them, as many of the more attractive features of a career in academia, such as the autonomy and opportunity to pursue ‘pet’ research projects, will be further reduced (Anderson

¹ Connelly and Clandinin (1999) introduce the concept of cover stories as stories used to address the institutional objectives but not necessarily representative of the beliefs or practices of the worker.
In addition, at the university in which this study took place, the work of individual staff has been increasingly subjected to the audit culture which is evident in managerialistic environments. This may be partly a response to external imperatives, with funding based on compliance with various outcomes, but it has been implemented with such fervour that it appears to be the preferred mode of management. In an environment such as this, in which fundamental conditions of a historically-sited profession are challenged, the consistency of the lived experiences of academic staff with the public institutional stories should be explored.

Academic stories

There are elements of the academic profession which makes its members unlikely to readily engage with the institutional stories. Friedson (1994, in Mitrano 1997) suggests that all professionals have a high altruistic orientation, a trait commented on as a particular characteristic of academic staff by Moses (1992; 1995), Moses and Ramsden (1992) and McInnes (1996). Moreover, academic staff are traditionally seen to be ‘professionals with a difference’, who are characterised by an ‘exceptional preoccupation and satisfaction with the intrinsic rewards of the work itself’ (Evatt Report 1994, p29), and by a relatively self-regulated work organisation. Academic staff tend to be satisfied with the work of the academy itself rather than status or money. They like their work and want the security and autonomy that an academic career provides (McInnes 1996). Academic staff have ‘demonstrated that peripheral erosions to their work conditions can and have been accommodated, if not relished, as long as the intrinsic satisfactions remain’ (Adams 1997, p5).

It appears that choice is one of these intrinsic satisfactions as it enables academic staff to construct a workplace identity which satisfies professional, personal and moral interpretations of university work. Connelly and Clandinin (1999, p115) suggest that people commonly make sense of turbulent change by assuming that they will emerge from the turbulence in a different context but defining themselves in the same way, retaining their professional identity. However, it can be argued that increasingly, the institutional stories of academic professional identity are becoming unfamiliar to many academic staff, particularly those who have been in tertiary institutions for some time. There is no longer a sense that the institution will emerge from turbulent change, rather that the rate of change will increase with resultant shifts for the academic profession and less scope for a variety of academic identities.

Constructing any identity is a process which is a particular struggle in academia, in which there are so many disparate parts of workplace existence to mould into a unified whole (De Simone 2001). One criticism of current academic policies and management is that they strive to create homogenous institutions staffed with homogenous academics, that is, they do not value a diverse range of skills, abilities and outcomes, and the resultant potential to respond to the changing environment in which tertiary institutions operate (Tierney & Bensimon 1996). In other words, they attempt to limit choice for their staff. There is, increasingly, a limited range of ‘academic stories’ which are valued by, and even acceptable to, the institution. These stories of success revolve around corporate measures, such as funding and external validation.

In this disjunctive experience, academic staff must consider their institutional role. They can choose to adopt the organisational stories to live by. These stories are often not representative of their views of their work, institution or personal values. They are not self-representational but organisation-representational. Academic staff can choose to leave to seek an environment where their personal stories fit with those of the organisation. Or they can remain in the organisation and search for a space where they can live by a story that is cognitively and emotionally self-representational, reflecting their beliefs and practices. These spaces are increasingly dominated by public discourses of corporate education so stories of self-representation must become hidden or secret, must be composed and enacted covertly and furtively.
The social actor is an agent, that is, he or she has the ability to engage in choice no matter how restrictive the conditions may be and this agency is a creative process central to the actor’s ability to construct alternative versions of organisational reality (Giddens 1982). This agency enables the infinite number of ways that one can be an academic. As the institution redefines ‘acceptable’ ways of being an academic and provides new stories around these corporate academic identities, some staff may have stories which now conflict with the broader environment. These stories may no longer be appropriate self-representations in public forums. They can, therefore, become secret (hidden) stories which academic staff can live by, but no longer work by (Connelly & Clandinin 1999). To work ‘successfully’ in the context, they need to master the narrative of cover (public) stories. In these public stories, they, as characters, may have to portray the skills and knowledge they had as now lacking relevance or value. They may have to jettison long held values in regard to the contribution they or their institution makes. They may have to redefine ‘meaningful’ work. The authors do not suggest that the new directions in higher education are concerning for all academic staff. For some, there may be new, appealing values and positions in the new stories of the corporate institution, which may inspire the creation of new self-representational academic stories. It is argued, however, that their pervasive nature limits the opportunities for the comfortable co-existence of multiple academic identities.

Method

Data for this paper was gathered during a world café event held at an Australian university in November 2007, on the topic of ‘Academic identity (re)construction through learning new practices’. University staff were invited to attend this event to discuss the ways in which they constructed their workplace identities, particularly reflecting on the influences of the increasing controls which had recently been implemented to monitor and regulate work practices. The invitation stated:

> With various imperatives to change the way we think about academic work – e.g. external factors such as the RQF\(^2\) and DEST\(^3\) requirements, internal factors such as the new Teaching and Learning Framework – academic staff are challenged to reconstruct their identities as teachers, researchers and knowledge workers.

Twenty-one people (19 females and 2 males) attended the event. Eighteen of them were from the faculty of education.

The world café process is conversational and ‘based on a set of integrated design principles that reveal a deeper living network pattern through which we co-evolve our collective future’ (http://www.theworldcafe.com, accessed 30 January 2008). In terms of world café principles, a hospitable space was created and attendees were provided with meaningful questions to guide their discussions. They noted their ideas on shared, large sheets and these notes provided the basis for the vignettes used in this article. The comments provided rich insights into the ways in which academic staff felt about both their role and the role of the institution. Gabriel (1999) provides an interesting summary of the use of narratives in studies such as this one:

> A highly effective way of analyzing how identities are continuously constructed, how they become fragmented, and how they are reconstructed is through the study of stories in which individuals encode their identity, narratives which do not purport

---

\(^2\) Research Quality Framework: The objective of the RQF is to develop a broad assessment mechanism of research quality and impact that will be relevant across the full breadth of Australian research organisations in receipt of public funding.

\(^3\) Department of Education, Science and Training: The federal government department responsible for developing and implementing polices related to education, science and training.
to merely report facts but poetically embellish facts for effect, allowing for a certain wish fulfilment. Stories do not present facts-as-information, but facts-as-experience, laden with symbolism and meaning, in which the storyteller expresses opinions, makes connections, displays feelings, and casts him/herself as a character in a meaningful narrative. (Gabriel 1999, p191)

Narratives thus created are not only conversational realities but are also constituents of ongoing and institutionalised patterns of societal conduct. They are sites of representation where subjectivities are constructed and contested. Through establishing valued outcomes and through endowing the narrative with actors and plots, narrators engage in moral evaluation. Through narration they also reiterate and transform culturally shared meanings, ideas, norms and values.

Findings

The vignettes represent two ‘identities’ which were dominant in the notes and the conversations witnessed by the authors. They are a composite of comments from group notes, and composed from the authors’ experiences, to provide stories which are not evident in official interpretations of academic work. We refer to these official descriptions of academic work, found in the job descriptions, marketing materials and internal corporate communications, as cover stories. The vignettes reflect the ways in which the academic staff make sense of their role and construct their workplace identities. These are their secret stories.

Secret story 1 – Academic joy

This job is my idea of heaven. I can wear what I want, manage my own time, wander round the library, browsing through interesting books. I feel like I belong here. I’m more at home here than in any of my other jobs. People ‘get’ me here. There is a sense of emotional energy. People value what I think and say. I love the idea that learning is an integral part of what I do. I like doing work which is meaningful and working with students who thank me. I have a lot of hope and clarity about my role. I have an identity as a teacher which gives me an internal sense of wellness. The research aspect of the role is challenging but I am slowly pursuing it. I am not that interested in promotion and climbing the academic ladder as I have had my fill of competitive workplaces and continual striving. In my last job, I found myself waking at 4am, worried about deadlines and crises. Here, I focus more on what I enjoy doing.

I am aware that there have been, and will be more, changes but I hope that the uni doesn’t shift too far as this seems to be the last workplace with the freedom to allow you to act with some independence.

This story was predominantly shared by participants who had been employed in the institution for less than two years or who were employed on a casual basis, seeking full time employment. Many were doctoral students who were marginalised from the majority of corporate conversations, with some having only intermittent access to corporate communications. Many were unaware of corporate directives and major shifts in university policies. They were oblivious to a recent launch of a significant development in university teaching policies. They had no evidence that they were valued employees, with their sense of being understood and valued, predominantly derived from conversations with peers and students.
They were, however, a cohort who had considerable experience in other workplaces, often in senior roles. Their comments were made in the context of these experiences with the university comparing favourably as an institution which valued their intellectual contribution and allowed them the freedom to explore ideas. This idealistic view was juxtaposed with their concerns that this state is under threat but they appeared to see this as a distant event which could be avoided.

This story of academic hope did not resonate with many who had longer careers at the university. Their stories were more about trauma, complexity, and isolation brought about by the demands of the corporate university environment.

**Secret story 2 – Academic loss and fear**

No matter how hard I work and what I give up, I never get to the pinnacle of this job. I don’t want to buy into the overwhelming competitiveness that is the uni now but I just can’t seem to avoid it. I used to feel like an inspirational teacher and enjoyed the close contact with students. Now there are new criteria enforced by controls and audits, new conditions, larger class sizes, and I find that lots of things I enjoyed about teaching are no longer there. I engaged with research when it became evident that this was part of my job but now the whole notion of research has changed and I have to confine my research to certain topics that attract funding or kudos. But these sources of funding and kudos change so I never feel that they are within my grasp. This type of research isn’t about things that matter to me or even interest me. I have jettisoned that long ago. So my work has become routine, mundane, procedural. This doesn’t fit with the idea of innovative, creative work or intellectual thinking. I feel really unclear about my role, what is expected of me or even what academic work should be.

I feel somewhat traumatised by this loss. This used to be a haven with opportunities for original, innovative work and the remnants of that must be protected. It is the last bastion for creativity and that is going in the face of the new managerialism. There is a new gold class of academic who meets the carefully designed, limited corporate measures of value and success.

So I dwell on the borders of the institution, staying out of the searchlight, flying below the radar. On the way to this institutional periphery, I lost the joy for working with students (too many of them), the research (too meaningless) and the collegial life (too disparate). In this isolated and alienated state, I no longer attempt to perpetuate an academic identity which differs from this gold standard, but I also no longer attempt to achieve it. I go through the academic motions and when the searchlight lands on me I have enough knowledge of the corporate norms to engage with the appropriate phrases. Then, as soon as I can, I scurry back to the academic shadows.

The disparity between these two interpretations is evident. While tellers of both stories inhabit the same world, they make sense of it in very different ways. Neither of these stories had been confirmed or denied by those in authority, yet both cohorts were convinced that their interpretations were ‘accurate’ representations of the current state of academic work and their institution.

They participants at the world café event shared varied ways of sustaining their stories. Those who shared secret story 1 sustained their version of academic work through interactions with peers and students. There was evidence of like-minded groups of colleagues who had privileged their shared
conversations and interpretations of their work over those of the institution. There were communities of staff who were removed from the corporate communications through either geographic, discipline or hierarchical barriers. Their relative isolation facilitated very little challenge to their story of academic joy.

For those who shared secret story 2, isolation was sometimes described as a strategy. Isolation and anonymity were considered to be safe, as they reduced exposure to corporate measures. For others, isolation was described as a form of passive resistance to unwanted change. Academic staff saw themselves as withholding their intellectual labour from the university so it could not be coopted for purposes they did not value. They described this behaviour using the metaphor of ‘flying beneath the radar’. They argued that it is a strategic activity which connotes considerable skill, as knowing where not to go is a valuable, sometimes only, way of working in the university.

This was taken to another level by others who shared secret story 2. Some contended that they did not always remain hidden and would openly resist and rebel when there were issues they regarded as important. While they were committed to ‘staying out of the limelight’, they asked, ‘Do we not want to be heard?’ They expressed awareness that, ‘sometimes the dangerous spaces are where decisions are made’. They aspired to ‘fearlessness’ and ‘standing up’ but, overall this thread was weak, with members expressing a sense that rebellion was both ineffective and had negative consequences. Passive resistance and avoidance of situations in which one was coerced to engage with managerial imperatives was considered a safer option.

**Implications**

The disparity of the stories highlights the ability of organisational members to make sense of similar organisational shifts in different ways. Sensemaking is conducive to privileging of information and the mythologising of histories, especially if workers are operating in relative isolation (Weick 1995). This isolation and the ability to be removed from the dominant organisational discourse was the common thread in both stories. One way of preserving an academic identity is to avoid excessive confrontation and challenge, which can be achieved by confining interactions to those who share that identity or maintaining isolated conditions.

This isolation appeared to be facilitated by the existence of multiple, dispersed campuses, relative autonomy of disciplines and the university’s extensive use of technology, such as emails and websites, in their communication practices. This, together with extensive travel commitments by lecturers, different teaching times and the common practice of working at home, have increasingly limited opportunities for personal contact. Isolation in academia is a recurring script, facilitating opportunities for hidden stories to be lived everyday.

Academic staff create and symbolically communicate their own sense of reality through the structuring of their story. They create ‘interpretive repertoires’ which are defined as ‘discernible clusters of terms, descriptions, common-places and figures of speech often clustered around metaphors or vivid images’ embedded in specific contexts. (Potter & Wetherall 1990, p1). Academic staff can draw on this pool of linguistic resources to represent themselves and their notions of academia.

There is a central story in the institution, one which is perpetuated by the official communication, the symbols of the corporate university such as slogans for success and promotional stories. This story is not, however, shared by all. For some organizational members, their naivety enables the perpetuation, perhaps temporarily, of a story of clarity, health and hope. For others, the complexity and rapid change which colours their academic experience leads them to exist in a peripheral position, as far removed as possible from the monolithic drivers of institutional change. It is evident, however, that secret stories
exist and enable academic staff to remain in the institution and engaged, to various levels, with their work. It does appear that, with shifting work conditions and the prevalence and power of technology in facilitating the corporate message and symbols, the cover story is becoming more dominant and restricting safe spaces for secret stories. When this happens, it is difficult to compose new stories to live by. The implications for both the academic profession and the institutions may include the reduction of the plurality which often fosters creativity. Will the hopeful optimism or the critical cynicism of the secret stories be expunged?

Another complicating factor is that the academic staff are often not equipped with skills and resources to enact their new cover story. They have to learn the language and genre of new corporate stories and, with this, their past skills and stories become redundant. For some, it was a long process to compose the story they have lived by. This composition took both emotional and cognitive investment which may now have no return. For this reason, academic staff can live by these stories with tenacity and conviction. This is not to say that these stories are complete entities which are not reviewed, revised or contextualised. These stories are multi-faceted with many plots in which the author can take on different roles and privilege different aspects of their story. With all this complexity, and acknowledging multiple influences, these stories must be seen as historically sited with the author’s rights as predominant. These rights are a way of preserving social and cultural capital around the discipline and the role they hold.

This capital is often hard won. Academic stories are constructed in a critical environment where members are scrutinised through a multiplicity of lenses. They are scrutinised as teachers by students, as workers by management/administration, as researchers by their peers and as a critical voice by the broader community. Academics are accustomed to defining and defending their stories, which can result in an overwhelming commitment to them or can render them fragile and susceptible. This fragility is exacerbated if the worker cannot find other people with symbols, phrases and stories which augment, validate or complement their emerging stories. Community support is a key to constructing narratives to work by. This support can come from any of multiple sources and doesn’t necessarily need to be authorised or validated by management. These communities can emerge and be sustained in multiple institutional locations but may not be valued in terms of new organisational directions. They may need a public, cover story to enable their existence, even if only on the institutional periphery.

Organisational stories are hierarchical. There are those that dominate the landscape and those that are marginalised. An organisation can be considered as a system of interconnected language communities existing within a larger language community (Mumby 1994). Mumby and Stohl (1991) assert that discourses (written or verbal) can structure systems of presence and absence within organisations, with control involving the compliance of others to a set of narratives and practices. The presence of narratives means that they become part of the ordinary, accepted practices of an organisation, with those that are dominant being seen as incontestable. They come to be experienced by organisation members as ‘objective’ and autonomous of the people who created them. In time these constructed meanings become ‘real’ and fixed and limit the possibility of acceptable alternative social realities (Mumby 1994). When one particular discourse, in this case the set of corporate narratives provided by the institution, is mandated as the only acceptable story, it calls into question the validity of other stories. In mandating one story as inevitable, the other organisational stories have no public voice.

In institutions such as universities, with multiple stakeholders, different interest groups can struggle to create a ‘meaning system’ which serves their interests and which can become the meta-narrative privileged over others, that is, a dominant discourse (Daniels, Spiker & Papa 1997, p254). Organisational narratives, or story-telling, can be used to share understandings of organisational life and can be politically manipulated to reinforce ideologies and this manipulation has been a key strategy in introducing new practices to academic staff. But, to have this effect, the stories must have
meaning for academic staff. In discounting the commitment that academic staff have to their secret stories and assuming that the corporate stories will resonate with all staff, management often misread the lack of engagement with some of the mandated change by academic staff.

The stories shared by participants in the world café indicated that the institutional change and broader shifts in the tertiary education environment were not rejected unconsidered. These cover stories may have been able to coexist with the academic staff’s secret stories if some synergies were recognised and accepted by management. In asking academic staff to relinquish the values which underpin their stories, university managements demonstrate either ignorance or dismissal of the key to enabling academic institutions to meet some of the disparate requirements of the contemporary environment. The presence of the corporate cover story does not necessarily have to be at the cost of the secret stories shared by academic staff, rather a recognition of these stories and the existence of safe institutional spaces to share them could facilitate a more diverse and collegial set of academic voices.

The result for the academic profession, as these spaces for stories are reduced, is the loss of plurality and limited opportunities for small collectives to create unique identities. There could become, in fact, only one story to live by in the institutional view. The illusion of removing choice neglects the agency of the staff and the depth of commitment to their view of the profession. Rather than an organisational web of stories making up a pluralised landscape, the institution is in danger of ostensibly becoming one monolithic story that all workers can chant while living their academic life in the shadows.

Conclusion

Managers in tertiary institutions appear to have lost sight of plurality in favour of a focus on unifying practices in an attempt to promote cohesion, which may be a response to the problematic issues of conflict and politics endemic to pluralism. This conflict, however, can be manifested in different ways, such as withdrawal of intellectual labour and a lack of ownership of and commitment to their work practices. The attempted suppression of academic staff’s stories which do not entirely conform with corporate directives does not result in their demise, but rather their manifestation in subversive forms. Creativity could be fostered through promoting spaces where the multiple stories can resonate, grow and sustain identities. They can be communal sites of resistance, collegiality, sustenance and innovation. Or, they can be symbolic repositories of organisational histories. Or, they can be the self-representation of moral, theoretical and practical positions. Within these spaces, validation of academic staff’s secret stories facilitates a broader engagement with the institution and academic work.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the participants of the ‘Academic identity (re)construction through learning new practices’ world café event (22nd November 2007) for sharing their stories and insightful observations of their academic work.

References

Insightful Encounters - Regional Development and Practice–Based Learning
Conference on Regional Development and Innovation Processes
March 5th-7th, 2008, Porvoo - Borgå, Finland


