

Negotiating the doctorate as an academic professional: identity work and sensemaking through autoethnographic methods

Abstract

This article focuses on identity flux and related negotiations that occur for doctoral students who start PhD programmes whilst already in post as full-time academics. Theoretically, we develop the concept of the *learned* and the *learning* academic as end points within a continuum used to explore academic identity negotiations. Autoethnography is here employed as a tool for reflexive engagement to illustrate how the identity sensemaking process for those who find themselves suspended in the student-lecturer ‘limbo’ is fostered by the recognition and engagement with critical incidents. Our findings contribute to studies on academic identities and to research on teaching and learning at the doctoral level by shedding light on the experience of learning and identity negotiation for a particular set of students.

Keywords

Identity negotiations; reflexivity; doctoral study; autoethnography; academics; learning

Introduction

Doctoral programmes are the highest level of education available to students, but are still an ‘initiatory trial’ and introduction to the academic profession (Skakni 2018). Given the commercialization of contemporary academia (Batko 2014), scholars must engage with continued professional development and life-long learning to achieve higher professional levels. In this context, established academics whom have not yet engaged in a doctorate degree may feel the need to pursue a PhD to remain competitive in the job market and enhance their skills. This article speaks to contemporary research exposing a growing need for doctoral programmes to be reviewed (Schillebeeckx, Maricque, and Lewis 2013), especially considering the increasingly diversified nature of the doctoral student population (Collins 2015; Naidoo 2015). We consider the personal, emotional and nuanced processes of identity sensemaking during the doctoral journey, in line with a growing body of literature (e.g. Sawir et al. 2008; Aitchison and Mowbray 2013).

For doctoral students, the negotiation of multiple identities enacted while studying for their thesis and training as a lecturer can be difficult to navigate. Similarly, if they are already an established academic they may find it challenging to question their existing knowledge and experience whilst re-engaging with formal learning processes. Recent research has considered the identity transition implemented from competent practitioner towards competent academic in specific sectors such as occupational therapy (Fortune et al. 2016) and management (Hay and Samra-Fredericks 2016). In this paper we consider another type of student identity – the experienced lecturer who embarks on a PhD programme after starting their teaching career – illustrating how the negotiation of multiple identities can be better understood through a reflexive sensemaking process during the doctoral journey. However, rather than conceptualise the learning experiences of the existing academic and PhD student as a linear progression between student and academic, like in Hay and Samra-Fredericks’ (2016) work, we frame it as

an ‘iterative limbo’ of learning in flux, reflexive sensemaking and identity negotiation. As Pearson et al. (2004) suggest, growth in the PhD student population has also been accompanied by widening heterogeneity in their characteristics (e.g. location of origin, class, race etc.), which naturally paves the way for an increase in specific learning and individual needs. Rather than linking our study with the existing conversation on the meaning of the contemporary academic in general (Jawitz 2009; Pifer and Baker 2013; Sutton 2015), we focus on the engagement with the individual’s own sensemaking process.

This paper aims to shed light on the identity flux and related negotiations that occur for doctoral students who start PhD programmes whilst already in post as full-time academics. We use autoethnography (Chang 2008) as an example to illustrate how reflexive methods can be used in learning not only by students but also by established professionals to help unearth unconscious dynamics through reflexive practices and to engage with meaning making on the nexus of identities or other aspects of intersectional learning processes. Our article shows how identity negotiations do not necessarily happen in a linear continuum but can fluctuate in time; sensemaking is then fostered by the recognition of critical incidents to enhance understanding of one’s positionality, which in this case refers to the continuum between the *learned* and the *learning* academic.

Contributing to the literatures on identity negotiation and learning in the doctoral journey, we explore how reflexive sensemaking can be applied to identity negotiations in doctoral programmes for people who may have varied degrees of already established identity markers and knowledge due to their professional experience (the *learned* academics) which need to be reconciled with another set of learning experience (the *learning* academic). We focus on the challenges faced by a specific cohort of people suspended in the student-lecturer limbo by understanding how multiple identities are managed through learning assumptions, previous academic experience and academic workloads. We address the complexity of the simultaneous

existence of these roles, including how they present both challenges and possibilities for doctoral students.

Stemming from established (Whittock 1997; Matthews and Jessel 2006; Hellowell 2007) and more recent conversations in this journal that consider reflexive approaches to learning and meaning making for both students and teachers (Mackay and Tymon 2013; Clegg 2015; Ryan and Carmichael 2016; Ripamonti et al. 2018), and the increasing use of autoethnographic or personal accounts in this field (Mayuzumi et al. 2007; Henderson 2017), we provide an empirical illustration of our argument by documenting the first author's autoethnographic accounts written whilst engaging with her PhD part-time as a full-time academic. Thus, we advocate the need to consider a non-linear understanding of identity as a fluctuating process for student-lecturers as a particular group of learners facing a significant challenge in the management of their learning and professional academic identities. We argue that such approach will increase self-awareness and enable a more critically minded and informed understanding of the student-lecturer identity. We begin first by outlining academic and student identities and the identity work and negotiations these roles entail, and then by exploring our theoretical construct. We then outline our methodological approach before presenting and discussing the first author's notes on her sensemaking and identity negotiations during the doctoral journey. We end the paper with some discussion and concluding reflections.

Negotiating identities in academia

Recognising, making sense of and managing multiple identities as academics and as students (Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach 2008) involves 'creating small openings' (Hatch and Groenke 2009) that consequently allow space for reflection, critical engagement and growth, where one becomes aware and responsive to their learning needs. Students face cognitive, emotional and social barriers to learning (Ahern and Manathunga 2004) that may be challenging to navigate.

We thus understand identity and the doctoral journey as part of the lived complexity of an individual's life project, whereby changes in an individual's identity recipe are sparked by others nearby and their lived processes (Clegg 2008). Using Sveningsson and Alvesson's (2003: 1165) definition, identity work refers to: 'people being engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness' and can occur continually or be intermittently ignited by other events and contexts. The construction, management and subordination or prioritisation of shifting identities therefore needs attention and reflexive engagement, especially because awareness of this is crucial for both students and lecturers as they (re)define their identities throughout the doctoral journey.

Beech (2008) suggests that identity work is a micro dialogical process of the self, aimed at navigating and establishing paths of meaning within and across varied roles. Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach (2008) explain how 'intersectional invisibility' occurs when somebody's personal subordinated identity(ies) conflict with the dominant identity in the group (termed 'prototype'). In the case of academic identity development during the doctoral journey, if an individual's main identity (in our example being a lecturer) is far from the main group identity (e.g. student, Graduate Teaching Assistant) or contrasts with it, the person can become marginalised. As such, subordination of identities must be considered for better understanding of doctoral students who are existing lecturers or have other identity shifts. Boyd and Smith (2016) describe academic identity as characterised by a combination of tasks and responsibilities, often including elements of teaching, researching, managing, writing and networking. In the case of student-lecturers, the management of these combined and sometimes conflicting tasks is perhaps exacerbated with the hierarchical and power dynamics present between their two roles that in turn can cause fractured identities. This continual dynamic negotiation between the narrative, practice and membership of different social or cultural communities is crucial to

the concept of identity (Giddens 1991). Conflict may arise when these shifting or fluid narratives lack coherence and consistency, especially from an individual's point of view, but also if in contrast with the reference group or professional context. This suggests that identity work can be laborious for professionals – academics or otherwise – who engage in doctoral studies while working full time, as the management of this alternating subordination between the two identities can create intellectual conflict and diminished performance in both roles.

Changes in an individual's biography and professional path can also bring unplanned identity challenges in their learning identities. Although an established academic might spontaneously engage in doctoral studies for pleasure, for enriching their understanding of a subject, or for voluntary professional development, in today's neoliberal academia holding a PhD has predominantly become a *condition sine qua non* for career progression. Whether the choice to engage in the doctoral journey is more spontaneous or directed, two significant starting positions can be identified in the continuum of the identity work discourse of an academic: 1. the *learning* academic, who learns through trial and error, who questions their assumptions, who reflects critically on their knowledge and professional practice, who is willing to implement changes, and enhance or enrich their practice; and 2. the *learned* academic who feels knowledgeable 'enough' in their field without engaging in further learning, who is entrenched in their acquired expertise and no longer questioning their own practice, who may resist change and who is open to learning when it is framed as a form of professional development conducted at a higher level of seniority. These are two extreme points on a continuum, but in our construct identity is considered as a changing rather than crystallised matter, which allows pluri-directional transitions across a fluid rather than binary learned/learning academic continuum.

The theoretical construct of the learned/learning academic was created through a reflection on the different attitudes that could contribute or hinder learning for existing

academics. It was sparked by the realization that identity negotiation happens first via the recognition of critical incidents that can then be taken forward through reflexive sensemaking, which can foster change. Therefore, on the one end of the continuum, the learned academic may choose to remain within the confines of their existing knowledge and practice informed by their professional expertise and experience, or fluctuate towards a less extreme position by identifying a crucial identity node in a critical incident within their learning process (which they may choose to address), or move towards the learning academic end of the continuum. The different positions negotiated along the continuum during the doctoral journey will result in different types and levels of engagement with identity work and the development of academic learning and professional practice. We see his process as iterative and not unidirectional. The practical and theoretical value of the framework is for the individual engaged in identity negotiation and sensemaking to become aware of their positionality within the continuum and to engage more meaningfully with critical identity nodes or developments that may be beneficial to reinforce or transform their academic identity through the learning process.

Methodological note

The value of reflexive methodologies within education has long been recognised for its contribution to effective learning (Cunliffe 2002; Iszatt-White, Kempster and Carroll 2017). Whilst a single autoethnographic illustration is not transferrable to all individuals in a specific group or context, the value of ethnographic work lies in the author's case being seen as an illustration and a relatable experience to others who may be experiencing similar emotions and – in this case a mix of professional academic concerns (e.g. workload management, reputation, questioning of one's professional knowledge) and issues more typically experience by PhD students (e.g. isolation, self-doubt). Alongside a more frequent adoption of reflective work in

learning processes, autoethnography has also become increasingly popular as a method and methodology challenging canonical ways of doing and thinking of research and representing others. Academics can therefore use autoethnographic accounts, either written or thought (Blenkinsopp 2007), to achieve a heightened level of understanding that may help them identify, explain and negotiate their different learning roles. One of the key points around discussions related to credibility, reliability and dependability of autoethnography refer to the narrator's integrity (Ellis, 2009; Bochner, 2002). As such, this method does not seek transferability, generalization, confirmability and replication as it aims at understanding nuances of meaning through individual experiences (Ellis et al. 2011).

In the second term of the first author's first year as a part-time PhD student, one of her colleagues teaching on the PhD programme suggested she keep a research diary. The first author decided to use it as a record of her learning journey, especially of what she considered salient moments and critical incidents, but particularly as a means of catharsis in the management of her emotions, the unveiling of concerns and extrication of the different threads of her identity negotiations as a lecturer-student. These critical events were therefore selected as moments of contentious negotiation between her established and developing identities. In her narratives presented below, we show how small openings were created through reflexivity and applied to her identity, the learning process, the relationship with colleagues/fellow academics in the communities of learning and practice, and the understanding of her own positionality as well as ambitions. Presenting her narrative through autoethnographic accounts captures the intricate ways in which she encountered and negotiated the intersectional identities associated with her lecturer and student roles.

England (1994: 82) defines reflexivity as 'self-critical sympathetic introspection and the self-conscious analytical scrutiny of the self as researcher'. It can also be described as the process of 'complexifying thinking or experiences by exploring contradictions, doubts,

dilemmas, and possibilities' (Cunliffe 2002: 38), and for individuals to understand their involvement in 'the politics of knowing and doing' (Moss 1995: 445). Reflexivity 'is the bridge between experience and learning, involving both cognition and feelings' (Boud et al. 1985: 11) and supports individuals in overcoming taken for granted assumptions (Raelin 2001; Kayes 2002). These characteristics of reflexive sensemaking approaches and the need for self-awareness are particularly relevant for those who have already established academic identities and may resist change, but need to situate their new learning experience alongside pre-existing assumptions and professional practice, such as the *learned* academic mentioned above. The first author's initial stage of her PhD programme had been difficult as she had found herself negotiating multiple identity roles. She felt especially caught in what she describes as a frustrating 'iterative limbo' between her academic roles – the lecturer, the course director, the PhD student and a potential early career researcher role – whilst her emotions went 'from comfort zone, to learning zone, to panic zone' (Gagnon 2008: 382). For instance, whilst she felt an adept teacher, by comparison, preparing presentations for conferences and learning to 'sell her research' became a difficult task in the early stages of doctoral study. Learning these aspects made her anxious, insecure and lacking in confidence, even though she was already effectively using similar skills in her existing academic practice.

The reflection *post facto* that derives from membership and involvement as an insider within a group inevitably means using past experience in the process of sensemaking, rather than reflections *in itinere* while writing and interpreting autoethnographic accounts, which fosters the process of reflexivity understood as 'reflecting on reflection'. The entries we present here have been selected from a larger body of texts and have been informed by Lindh and Thorgren's (2015) concept of 'critical event recognition' in the establishment of the exemplary nature of some entries as critical learning points during the first author's PhD. The common trait linking these critical events/incidents is the presence of a node of identity conflict between

the lecturer and the student roles. Her accounts are presented as a broader illustration of the type of processes that can occur for doctoral students who are already lecturers or other established professionals who engage in identity negotiations during a PhD programme. We present the whole narrative of each diary entry (with pseudonyms for those involved in the story) before discussing it in order to allow the autoethnographic accounts to become an uninterrupted space where the first author's two identities can co-exist, and thus enable the assumptions and tensions to play out amongst themselves. We begin by considering the key aspects pertinent to these two identities by presenting the first author's background story.

Sensemaking and identity negotiations in the doctoral journey

The background story

When she enrolled onto her doctoral programme the first author was similarly aged to the other PhD students, but she was also married and committed to a full-time lecturing career, which often made her unavailable to socialise with the other students on her course. She knew little about their experiences or any challenges they were having, and the only recurring complaint she heard in class from them regarded their disappointing supervisors, which she struggled to understand because this was not the case for her. She felt lonely in her 'self-imposed lecturer-doctoral student limbo'. Consequently, she tried, with little luck, to find another more convenient social space to support her doctoral journey and talked about her research with her family (who were not academics) and colleagues in her academic department. Her feelings were in line with studies on the experience of part-time students who spend limited time at the University and socialising with their peers and which can negatively affect their learning experience (Deem and Brehony 2000). This seemed to be the case even though she spent all her days at her University interlacing work and study. Unsurprisingly, time management and role boundaries became two major challenges throughout her doctoral learning process. Watts

(2008: 369) suggests that ‘one of the main challenges for part-time students is the strain of having to make the psychological adjustment of constantly switching from one mindset to another’ as they are a heterogeneous group with multiple responsibilities and continuously shifting identities (student/professional/parent/carer etc.), causing a ‘fractured student identity’ (ibid.). The first author felt she experienced this fractured identity in the early stages of her PhD. This frustrated her, led to a slowdown in her research, and impeded her motivation.

Learning to become a student with a colleague

I went to see Harriet today. Went to her office, with piles and piles of books and papers stacked in precarious Pisa towers. God knows how she manages to find anything, but she always says, ‘have you read so and so’ and pulls a volume from somewhere. She is funny, in a very intelligent British way. Told me a story of male professors gendering a viva and how she put them in their place, that touched me. I like that she never sits behind the desk away from me, but pulls up a chair next to me or asks me to sit together by the coffee table. I wonder if she does this with the other students or only with me because I am a lecturer. Still, very nice and very non-hierarchical, unlike some other European countries where she would have probably smoked a cigarette in my face and asked me to get her an espresso or something. We talked about what I have read so far, she seemed pleased and suggested a few more articles. I want to check out the literature on identity, but Harriet said that’s another thesis. I am probably trying to fit too much in one project. Over-keen bunny as usual. I told her about attending the summer school and how I ended up having to sign up for the ethnography classes as the qualitative interviewing ones were all booked. I don’t know how I am going to manage the summer module with all my workload, plus the exams marking and the externals’ visit. Do I really need to attend

those courses? I am a lecturer after all; maybe I can just do some extra reading? Well, at least it's free, as the University pays for staff and students to attend. She was super supportive again today, like in the first two meetings. At times, I don't really know what she expects of me, she always says that I am doing great and that she sees the PhD forming in my head. Glad she does. I sort of told her about the divorce and how the PhD is my moment of happiness, my going back to me, me taking care of my future. She seems incredibly confident in my abilities, while I feel like an impostor sometimes. I can't believe that she has such a high opinion of my research and my academic potential. She is a Professor! Today she said she has examined over 20 PhDs, so maybe I am not too bad after all. She must be crazy though – she told me she thinks I will finish my PhD part-time in 3 years. She must be matta persa [‘totally crazy’ in Italian] – how can I manage that speed when I work full-time as a lecturer and course director, trying to run a home and manage a divorce when normal PhD students take four years? We'll see... (Beginning of first year note).

The first author's negotiations between her student-lecturer roles are apparent from the beginning of her PhD. Specifically, identity work manifests itself with the forming of her relationship with her supervisor – in the management of the space and sitting areas – and in the conflict between her workloads, class attendance and lack of confidence in her learning ability. Being a teacher already she had grown accustomed to critical approaches to practice and found it difficult to accept a positive and trustful judgement on her work. Combined with her expression ‘over-keen bunny’, this shows that her perception of the likely progress achievable as a student was also hindered by her practical knowledge base of what is usually doable as a part-time student, illustrating her infantilising of her student role. While her general tone is of

a *learning* academic (as a student-lecturer working on her PhD), the expression ‘I am a lecturer after all’ implies a *learned* approach, and that she may need to suspend some of her longstanding learning positions so she can embrace other effective learning experiences. She wonders from the beginning about the usefulness of her lecturing experience in supporting her doctoral study.

Welcoming new forms of learning

Oh My God, I found my academic home! Kevin is a great teacher. Well, he looks like a surfer (never saw anyone teaching at a University in flip flops and shorts before!) but he is really engaging and explains things well. I found autoethnography, it's like my academic grail – I can totally use my own life experience in my PhD research. It feels a bit like cheating though, or at least that's what all my positivist quantitative colleagues say. How can I be objective...well that's not the point, is it? It's like we speak different languages and see the world through different glasses for real. Jay laughed at me when I tried to explain ethnography. Never heard of it in Italy – ‘why don't they teach us methodology and methods in this much detail?’

I read those two books by Ellis. Those really inspired me. I finished the second one on the train on the weekend, it was a glorious day, sun shining (I was so captured by the book that I didn't even get annoyed by the flickering sunshine running away on the pages, like I usually do). Maybe that's what happiness at work is for me – discovering new ideas, reading a mesmerising book, getting lost in elucubrations about ontologies and gender studies and other topics that tickle my brain. I just

want to write now. I want to interview people and use my story too (End of first year note).

The first author's entry here illustrates the *learning* academic mode. As she explored new knowledge and experience as a student, she was then able to transfer it to her work practice. The writing in her *learning* academic spaces enabled her to think about her professional ambitions, desires and interests in the workplace, and her role as a *learned* academic.

Claiming a newfound identity

So, I met with Elwyn for coffee this afternoon. It was a little awkward. I showed up at his office hours as I thought it would be the most appropriate thing to do. He was totally puzzled, asked me what I was doing there. I explained that I had some questions about one of the papers we have been using in his class. He laughed, and said that I didn't have to go to his office hour; that's for students and I am a colleague doing a PhD. But I am not just that – he is my teacher, he explains things in lectures for me, he marks my work. And I love being a student: sitting in the lecture room, soaking up the new materials, the atmosphere, listening to the discussions without having to manage the class and the time or the tasks. Anyway, I told Elwyn that I am a student though, and that I am finding the management of my lecturer-student roles with him and other colleagues a bit odd – he is my lecturer but we also work together and meet for committees and stuff. I told him I'd like to keep the two personae separate, as I want to have the students' naïve curiosity and the opportunity to ask questions without looking like a stupid lecturer. He said he understands, but I don't think he does. I hope this won't affect my professional reputation. What if I write a bad assignment – will the word get around? Hopefully

not. But this place is like a village full of people with too much time on their hands.

(Second year note).

This extract demonstrates the first author's desire and perceived need to separate her student-lecturer roles. She felt that while an openly *learning* approach should be sought as conducive to study and self-improvement, it would clash with the *learned* identity that she thought her colleague had taken for granted. This dissonance made her feel uncomfortable as her professional working status did not allow her the same safe space for making mistakes. Whilst students can make mistakes and learn from them, she struggled to appreciate that this learning process could also be condoned for staff.

Embracing the new student identity

I am leaving for a conference tomorrow. I am shitting myself – I present on the first day! Trevor said I was silly, that I present to my classes every day, so why am I getting self-conscious about this when I can talk to and even entertain stones? I am so happy to have found this group of friends, people with similar interests and people who get what I do. I can see now how I have changed, how I have blossomed through this, how my insecurities are fading away, how I am good enough for someone [my supervisor and lecturers assessing the taught aspects of my PhD work]. (Second year note).

Here the first author's account demonstrates a changing dynamic about insecurity and confidence – on one hand she is anxious at the thought of presenting her work under her researcher identity for the first time; on the other, she can now reflect on her progress as a student, her growth and the quality of her work, which the *learning* academic part of her

identity had doubted at the start of her PhD journey (see first note). As a result, her narrative shows that as a *learned* academic she knows when she should reflect and become a *learning* academic again. Wenger (1998) using the concept of ‘communities of practice’ draws attention to the social and enacted nature of learning, comprised of doing (practice), belonging (community), experience (meaning) and becoming (identity), all of which can be associated with academic work and shows how academic identity making can be a complex process of negotiation and flux. In our case, whilst ‘doing’ the PhD some tension was initially ignited by the seemingly conflictual nature of the two lecturer/student identities as the first author began to negotiate a space and position of belonging in the balance between inclusion and exclusion within the two communities of practice. Through this experiential process of meaning-making she became a different type of academic professional and embraced a dual identity through her experience as a student. Further to these practice elements, Nicholls (2005) has shown that a considerable amount of academic learning derives from experience ‘on the job’ and in social interactions within and outside of the department (Baird 1993; Golde 1998; Sala-Bubaré and Castelló 2016). Similarly, for academics involved in a PhD, learning can happen not only literally ‘on the job’ they already have, but also ‘on the course’.

Learning to understand coexisting identities

The guys are freaking out about finding jobs, literally running around like crazy and applying to lots of posts, or sticking their head in the sand and metaphorically covering their ears going ‘lalalalala’ thinking they’ll find a good lecturing job just because they have a PhD. I feel almost guilty sometimes for having a stable job, for having passed probation and for knowing that the viva is not the end – it’s not the ribbon to tear up at the arrival sign, it’s just the beginning. And I don’t think they have a realistic idea of what academia is today. No ivory towers and hours spent

contemplating metaphysical inspiring issues anymore. Trevor is under so much pressure to find a job, especially as it took him five years to complete. But I loved his thesis. He told me I'm the only weirdo he knows who likes reading other people's theses... (Second year note).

In this narrative, the first author's *learned* academic experiences and permanency allow her to escape some common concerns of doctoral students. Simultaneously we see the juxtaposition and coexistence between her student and lecturer identities and a distancing from the other students' common issues that mean she feels less stressed. As Mills et al. (2014) identify, some of the most common pressures for PhD students concern balancing study and other life aspects, although little research specifies what these other life aspects might be or how they sit within prior learning contexts and environments. Feeling unable to share these emotions made her 'almost guilty' in the *learned* recognition of her advantage over her student colleagues, and the benefits of her position.

Integrating identities

I can't believe I am almost done with this. And in three years, like Harriet had said. But now we need special permission from the Dean to submit the thesis so early, and someone else in the Business School needs to read it and approve it. They fuff so much when people are late that you'd think they'd make it easier for people who complete ahead of time. We also need to choose the externals, but I don't really know anybody in the field. I told Harriet that I really like Bryn's work, so maybe him? Reading back on my notes I can see what Harriet has been doing to help me, and what she meant before in some of those sessions when I came out more confused than convinced. I had underestimated her contribution as a supervisor at the

beginning – I should have known, I do some of those things with my own students! Always different when it's about you, though, isn't it? She says I'm the perfect student, she wishes everyone was like this – like one of those toys for kids that you charge and point in the right direction, and then they just go steaming ahead. I think it's a compliment. (Third year note).

Here the *learned* and *learning* academic identities are intertwined with the first author's lecturing knowledge which in turn feeds her student identity and viva anxieties. As she nears the end of her doctoral journey, the separation between her roles begins to reduce, such as when the *learning/learned* identities converge as she acknowledges the techniques used by her supervisor to support and develop her researcher identity. Consecutively, while she is *learned* in her managerial and teaching job, she is still *learning* and developing as a researcher since she perceives she has a lack of networks. However, overall, the multiple identities have been negotiated into complementary rather than conflicting pieces of the puzzle.

Converging identities

Waiting for the viva is evil. Caroline is nervous for hers too, but at least her professional reputation is not on the line. What if I get major corrections? In an ideal world, I wouldn't get any corrections at all, but I know it's very rare here. Diana very kindly read the thesis to approve it for early submission, and she was very encouraging. I went to see her in her office, really in the pits of the University, and I wasn't full of hope for the meeting as she had already stood me up once. But I did meet her, and she is lovely – extremely softly-spoken, very gentle, super encouraging. She said she really loved my thesis. She looks like a very 'English Lady' but her colourful skirt, the choice of artwork and the flowers in her office –

which she has made very cosy yet professional – suggest unexpected creativity. She seemed like someone I would really enjoy working with. I asked her what I could change before the submission, but she said I should just submit it as it is. Really? I know she did read it though, as she had lots of comments, and offered to do a mock viva with me. That would be great as I am very nervous. I keep having nightmares. One of the externals is a Professor from [University name] ... God I hope she is not one of those super-theoretical people who specialise in one concept developed to exhaustion by one cryptic philosopher which is then used in their work for the next 20 years, and they expect to see it in everybody else's work too ... my work is very applied. In the dream, I enter the room and there is one of those hyper-dramatic theme songs from the black-and-white mute movies denoting that someone is going to die. I have been trying to think of all the evil questions they could possibly ask me, and I am scared that my mind will go blank and I won't be able to speak in English. But now I must just wait. After the conference this year I realised that I love research, I really do, but what interests me the most is a bit at the margins of my field, and people now seem obsessed with these starred publications – like your academic worth is based solely on the size of the constellation you put together on your CV. I am not sure that I want to move to a research contract in this context any more, maybe I'd rather go on with my job and research what I want, when I want, with the people I want. (Pre-viva note).

This last note suggests a conversion of identities for the first author as the *learning* lecturer-student who attends the meeting for feedback is simultaneously wondering and worrying about future collaborations as a *learned* academic with her colleague. Before the viva, the first author's insecurities resurface in her student identity, particularly regarding her *learning*

approach that she thinks can negatively affect her reputation and professional outcomes in an already *learned* academic setting. Her *learning* academic approach as a student then becomes subconsciously more prominent.

Discussion and concluding reflections

Drawing on the concepts of *learning* and *learned* academics as end points of an academic identity continuum framework this paper has illustrated how a reflexive engagement with learning can enhance sensemaking in identity negotiations for those who embark on a PhD as an existing practising academic. Whilst we might expect that being a *learned* academic may facilitate and enrich learning for doctoral students, we have also seen that certain conflicts can arise through being a *learned* academic who can lack flexibility and openness to the critical learning process. The first author's autoethnographic accounts support Mezirow's (1990) view that critical reflection can develop more transformational and emancipatory learning, and advocate the use of a reflexive sensemaking approach regarding one's positionality and identity negotiations throughout the doctoral journey. Being a *learned* academic with experience of critical practice precluded the first author from having the same free reign and allowable curiosity that a full-time doctoral student without prior accustomed learning might otherwise have. However, the *learned* position can also be positive as carrying multiple identities meant that the first author's accustomed learning provided her with knowledge of the overt and hidden expectations of academia with her understanding of the 'whackademic' game (McKay and Monk 2017). These reflexive critical moments also enabled her understanding of the context in which she was operating and ultimately helped improve her efficiency as a doctoral student. As a *learning* academic, reflexivity applied to critical incidents in her narrative helped her identify incongruences between her expectations and the reality of being a student-lecturer (i.e. different kinds of supervision, academic achievements, power shifts between her roles, fear of

unprecedented academic failure etc.). Whilst this approach created insecurities, it consequently aided her identification of possible negotiations, boundary spanning settings and solutions to issues identified reflexively. Subsequently she became a more *learning* academic whilst retaining some aspects of her *learned* academic identity, managing and eventually overcoming her perceived role crisis when caught between the student-lecturer iterative limbo.

The identity work process engaged with during a doctorate often involves cognitive dissonance and logical obstacles, but also includes the management of emotions interlaced in its learning (Leathwood and Hey 2009; Aitchinson and Mowbray 2013), including self-doubt, stress, anxiety, pride and loneliness. In this fragile emotional context, a positive adoption of both the *learned* and *learning* perspectives might result in a more conducive adoption of reflexive processes and constructive engagement in sensemaking through openness and critical approaches.

We conclude therefore that whilst studying for a doctorate, reflecting on one's identity negotiations and positionality could critically uncover intentions, predispositions, biases and goals and manifest conscious learning choices across the journey when managing multiple identities. In the case of boundary spanning academics caught in the student-lecturer limbo, reflection on identity understood as a fluctuating process could assist both the *learned* and the *learning* academic in developing more critical and fruitful engagement with their knowledge and professional practice.

Studies on PhD students have initially focussed on factors influencing training effectiveness and challenges to learning (Bowen and Rudenstine 1992; Baird 1993; Golde 1998). In addition, later research has also explored students' experiences (e.g. McAlpine and Norton 2006) in conjunction to this. We contribute to the latter and have used autoethnographic reflexivity as an illustration of a reflexive method to foster learning and the identity sensemaking process. This method of engaging with reflexive practice requires individuals to

expose their weaknesses and vulnerabilities alongside their strengths and accomplishments, and identify their biases and limitations in building their academic selves. The adoption of an autoethnographic approach means that individuals can reach increased self-awareness, reflexivity and a deeper engagement with their practices and environment, but it may also present difficulties and limitations for student-lecturers as they embrace evolving identities. Also, its effectiveness relies on an individual's ability to bare and critically analyse feelings, thoughts and experiences, which may not be a suitable approach for all. This self-criticality towards academic practice and identity may be easier said than done in the current academic context that is competitive and market oriented, characterised by intense workloads and an inherent focus on excellence. Therefore, although reflective tools can facilitate deeper learning (Mezirow, 1990) and even produce unsettling discoveries (Reynolds 1999), these may prove uncomfortable, insufficient and even at odds with contemporary learned academic identities if not addressed through genuine reflexive engagement processes.

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