Crossing Epistemic Boundaries
The Professional Learning of Academics in Higher Education

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ABOUT ME

- Learning Technologist
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Academics working in UK Higher Education are:

- facing an **existential crisis** of authority, legitimacy, identity and purpose (Behari-Leak, 2017);

- navigating a **world of uncertainty and complexity** (Barnett, 2000) in post 'Brexit' Britain;

- working in Universities driven by **New Public Management (NPM) policies and practices** (Boyask et al., 2004), e.g. corporate efficiency, entrepreneurialism, customer-focused (Hussey & Smith, 2010);

- being measured against **new accountability, auditing and performativity regimes** (Mäkitalo, 2012) that fetishizes data (Anderson, 2017), e.g. Key Performance Indicators (KPI), Research Excellence Framework (REF), and Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF).

So...

1) What are the conditions (e.g. academic role) that enable or encumber professional learning of academics in higher education?

2) To what extent does an academic give precedence to one form of professional knowledge (e.g. subject discipline) over another (e.g. institutional policy)?
Those relevant individual or collaborative opportunities, encounters or experiences that promote enhanced skills, knowledge, capabilities and practices that are situated within an HE academic's own career development and may also meet present and future organisational objectives.

**PROFESSIONAL LEARNING**

**FORMAL**
- Conferences
- Courses (e.g. PGCAP)
- Reading
- Workshops

**INFORMAL**
- Blogging
- Committees
- Listening to Radio
- Peer Discussions
Humans are constituted through relations of materiality - bodies, clothes, food, devices, tools, which, in turn, are produced through human practices. The distinction of humans and artifacts, on this view, is analytical only; these entities relationally entail or enact each other in practice. As Law puts it (2004:42; emphasis in original):

"This is a thoroughgoing relational materiality. Materials - and so realities - are treated as relational products. They do not exist in and of themselves".

Orlikowski, 2007:1438
SOCIOMATERIAL PERSPECTIVES

**Actor-Network Theory (ANT)**
(e.g. Latour, 2005; Law, 2008)

...a disparate family of material-semiotic tools, sensibilities and methods of analysis that treat everything in the social and natural worlds as a continuously generated effect of the webs of relations within which they are located. It assumes that nothing has reality or form outside the enactment of those relations. Its studies explore and characterise the webs and the practices that carry them. Like other material-semiotic approaches, the actor-network approach thus describes the enactment of materially and discursively heterogeneous relations that produce and reshuffle all kinds of actors including objects, subjects, human beings, machines, animals, 'nature', ideas, organisations, inequalities, scale and sizes, and geographical arrangements.

Law, 2008:141

**Non-Representational Theory (NRT)**
(e.g. Lorimer, 2005; Thrift, 2008)

...focus falls on how life takes shape and gains expression in shared experiences, everyday routines, fleeting encounters, embodied movements, precognitive triggers, practical skills, affective intensities, enduring urges, unexceptional interactions and sensuous dispositions...which escape from the established academic habit of striving to uncover meanings and values that apparently await our discovery, interpretation, judgment and ultimate representation.

Lorimer, 2005:84
METHODS & METHODOLOGY

Transformative Mixed Methods Design

Content Analysis
Strategy & Policy Documents, Staff Development Brochure

Questionnaire
27 questions. 535 academic staff invited (n: 182) – 35%

Semi-Structured Interview
8 questions. 1 hour one-to-one interview (n: 12)

Photovoice
Photographs. 1 hour one-to-one slideshow (n: 12)
PARTICIPANT PROFILE

Module Leader
Permanent Contract
Main University Campuses
1-20 years experience in HE

47 respondents
12 participants
**Key Findings**

- **Institutional Noise**
  Disruptions and interruptions caused by technology (e.g. email), people (e.g. colleagues) and processes (e.g. meetings).

- **Surrogate Workspaces**
  Fixed spaces used for academic work and professional learning that places academics 'out of sight'.

- **Transient Workspaces**
  Fluid spaces used for academic work and professional learning that places academics 'out of sight', e.g. car.

- **Human-Automobile**
  Provides an invaluable spatial and temporal window of opportunity for professional learning.

- **Knowledgeable Others**
  Subject knowledge reigns supreme over other forms of knowledge (e.g. employability).
**Preliminary Conclusions**

**Learning-Working**
Professional learning and academic work are intimately entwined (cf Malcolm & Zukas, 2014).

**Space Invasion**
HEIs encouraging the development of shared office space. An 'incubator for ideas'.

**Sanctuary**
Importance of a space that enables creative & critical thought, production & professional learning.

**Time War**
Professional learning seen as a 'luxury' as externally imposed and controlled timetables set time available (see Ylijoki & Mäntylä, 2003).

**Facile Knowledge**
The role of the 'knowledgeable other' enables academics to absorb certain knowledges (e.g. sustainability). Knowledge may be superficial.
THANKS FOR LISTENING!

QUESTIONS?


Special thanks go to the twelve participants who warmly invited me into their learning worlds.

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