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Developing an identity as an Ed.D leader: A reflexive narrative account

Abstract

This paper considers the challenges encountered by a recently appointed assistant programme leader in establishing an identity as a leader of an Ed.D programme. In discussing literature on the development of the Ed.D the paper recognises an existing concern with student identity but highlights a need to consider the development of the Ed.D leader's identity as a leader. Employing a reflexive narrative the paper emphasises the centrality of the leader's disabled identity in considering the role and in becoming a leader. The Ed.D is identified as a social space where colleagues are often engaged their professional learning with the Ed.D leadership team support. This paper tracks some of the commonplace behaviours around such learning, in a post 1992 institution, and discusses the implications for Ed.D leadership and management teams, when trying to consider and implement changes to established organizational cultures.

Word count 140 /150.

Key words: Doctorate of Education; Disability; Higher Education; Identity; reflexive narratives; social spaces; Stammering.

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Introduction

Employing a reflexive narrative to explore the contested site of the Ed.D, the paper focuses on the experiences of one member of the Academy, a sociologist, currently working in an education department of a post 92 institution and contributing to the leadership of an Ed.D as part of the programme leadership team. Working in an education department which is vocationally orientated and situated outside of the social sciences the reflexive narrative explores how an identity of a social science academic in the role of a leader on an Ed.D programme is produced within an education department. Additionally, identifying as a disabled academic and person who stammers, the narrative explores the ways in which a precarious identity, conscious of an expectation to perform aesthetic labour as a 'leader' is produced. Beginning with an overview of the growth in professional doctorates the paper goes on to consider identities within the Academy. The narrative is focused on the management of identity for one member of the Academy, the first author who has a leadership role on an Ed.D programme. The discussion is supported from a recent graduate of that programme, currently a programme leader of an MA Education programme in a Russell Group university.

The Landscape of the Ed.D

The landscape of higher education has evolved in recent years, reflecting a context of internationalisation, marketization and the demands of the 'knowledge economy' (Kot and Hendel, 2012). A 'mass Higher Education' (Scott, 1995) has replaced a purely elite education and a growth in student numbers across higher education has also seen the dramatic expansion of professional doctorates, both in terms of the number of institutions offering such programmes, and the number of students enrolling on them (Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2016). As identified by Fell *et al.* (2011) professional doctorates have a number of key characteristics that distinguish them from more traditional PhDs. These characteristics are that they are practice based and undertaken by people in work with professional experience and expertise, and these students therefore also tend to be older, often in their 40s and far beyond. The research element undertaken as part of the professional doctorate will relate to the

work context of the practitioner/student and is aimed at making an original contribution to practice. While in the traditional PhD candidates are expected to demonstrate an original contribution to knowledge, the production of knowledge in a professional doctorate comes from practice and may be considered to be more applicable to a knowledge economy (Ref). One of the most commonly offered professional doctorates is the Doctorate of Education, or Ed.D (Park, 2005) with 72 programmes being offered in 54 HEIs in England, as of 2015 (Careers Research & Advisory Centre (CRAC), 2016). First offered in the UK in 1992 (Taysum, 2006) the Doctorate of Education is focussed on the development of students' knowledge and ability to undertake and apply research to practice. The Ed.D differs from some other professional doctorates in that it is not a 'licence to practice' undertaken by those entering an educational career, but is undertaken by experienced practitioners.

Typically, programmes provide opportunities for educational practitioners with professional experience and expertise to study part-time, remaining in their specialist practice as they study the Ed.D. Typically, Ed.D programmes involve taught elements, with students coming together as a cohort for at least part of their studies. Independent study, culminating in the submission of a thesis which is usually shorter than a traditional PhD thesis comes in the later stages of study. Consequently the supervision relationship between academic staff and Ed.D students and differs from that of a traditional PhD supervisor of a PhD student. With the growth of professional doctorates, specifically Ed.D programmes this represents a changing nature of doctoral supervision and has been discussed in detail elsewhere by Malfroy (2005) and more recently Taylor (2012). Discussions around the changing supervisory relationship suggests that new practices of supervision and pedagogic leadership are emerging in response.

Not only is the growth of student numbers leading to changing practices but the nature of the doctoral student body has also attracted academic attention. In particular, researchers have focused on the identities of a diverse Ed.D student body (Rayner *et al.*, 2015; Zambo, Buss and Zambo, 2015). Studies have typically explored the ways in which Ed.D students form a student body distinct from traditional PhD students. Revealing Ed.D students to be, generally, older, part-time and established in a profession that closely corresponds with their doctoral studies (Jameson and Naidoo,

2007) the motivations of these students differ from traditional PhD students. Ed.D students are more likely to be pursuing a doctorate as a 'positional good' in a quest to further advance their career (Brown, 2003), often outside of the Academy. Studies have therefore explored the way in which identity is transformed through the course of the Ed.D, from professional to independent researcher, and attention has also been given to the development of student identities as experienced by staff in the academy and the pedagogical responses to this (Malfroy, 2005; Taylor, 2007; Klenowski *et al.*, 2011). This context has implications for leadership of Ed.D programmes, for instance in moving away from a master-apprentice model of supervision, staff on Ed.D programmes may adopt a more collaborative approach to supporting cohorts of students (Malfroy, 2005). However, while there is consideration of pedagogical responses emerging out of the changing nature of supervision, understandings of the construction of identities of those in leadership roles on Ed.D programmes are less well developed. Additionally, experiences of disabled academics remains under researched (Williams and Mavin, 2015) with several studies highlighting the challenges that some disabled academics face with career progression (Horton and Tucker, 2014; Smith and Andrews, 2015; Williams and Mavin, 2015). Nevertheless, the issue of disabled academics holding leadership roles is explored by Emira *et al* (2016) who, unexpectedly, found an high proportion of disabled academic staff holding leadership roles. Several barriers and challenges to achieving these roles and being effective in them were identified by the participants revealing that disability may present a challenge to leadership, but does not necessarily exclude the disabled academic from achieving such a role. As Horton and Tucker observe "the academic workplace is frequently a key site in the constitution of individuals' disablement" (2014, pp. 76–77). Disability is a an important part of an individual's identity and impacts on practices within the workplace (Jammaers, Zanoni and Hardonk, 2016). In this case, the disability, a stammer may not be immediately visible, though is ever present, and can reveal itself without warning. It can and does have implications for communication and impacts on both the bearer's and listener's perception of competence, such as an attitude to ability to lead. Therefore, the issue of a disabled academic's identity will be explored as part of the reflexive narrative below, contributing a unique perspective to on leadership within an Ed.D.

Academic Identities

Academic identities are not fixed (Clegg, 2008) but are instead constructed through complex spatial and temporal contexts of the Academy. For example, increased managerialism and marketization of higher education have been discussed as presenting a challenge to the continued existence of traditional academic identities (Deem and Brehony, 2005; Collyer, 2015). Developing the concept of *academic habitus* (Bourdieu, 1988) a number of scholars have discussed the ways in which an academic identity is shaped through the power relationships of the higher education institution (Reay, 2004; Deem and Lucas, 2007). Researchers have highlighted the agentic practices of academics who respond to an academic culture whose values they might not share in ways that help them to shape a desired academic identity. Some of the participants in Clegg's (2008) research reported aligning themselves with disciplinary traditions and as a consequence felt themselves to be 'outsiders' when working in vocationally orientated departments.

Responses to this feeling of being an outsider included seeking personal satisfaction from engaging in academic activities outside the institution they are employed in (such as presenting at conferences and writing journal articles) rather than seeking satisfaction from within the workplace. Currently working in an education department as a social scientist, as opposed to having being an educational practitioner, the findings of such studies (Deem and Lucas, 2007; Clegg, 2008; Collyer, 2015) have particular resonance to this paper. Feelings of being an 'outsider' in this educational space are ever present and are associated with aligning oneself with the discipline of the social sciences. Nevertheless, to state, when asked, that one is a sociologist or social scientist is also an attempt to claim a particular academic identity. Explored in more detail below, this paper adds to the findings of these studies by considering the experiences of leadership within a professional doctorate.

A reflexive narrative offers a localised account of the experience of the construction of identity through leadership of an Ed.D. Reflexivity is inextricably linked to identity, but not unproblematically. According to theories of reflexive modernity it is suggested that individual identities are constructed through active agency (Giddens, 1991) where the individual has the ability to choose his or her own identity by consuming "from the range

of possibilities on offer” (Sweetman, 2003, p. 530). However, the range possibilities on offer may not represent true choice for the individual but instead constitute a form of power to which the individual must respond, according to their habitus (Bourdieu, 1988). This can be seen, for example, in Claire’s decision to identify as a disabled academic. The decision was agentive in the sense that a choice was made to identify as such, but the nature of the disability, a stammer may force the revealing of a disability, meaning that choice is constrained by the nature of the ‘impairment’.

Reflexive narrative offers a means of critically understanding the individual’s relation to the space of the Ed.D. Narrative can constitute a form of knowledge, about oneself, but also about the social context and offers a mechanism for reflecting on the individual’s place in this context. Providing a privileged access to individual experiences, narratives offer a means of telling about knowing experiences. However, the use of narratives in the social sciences may be criticised as being self-indulgent (Smith and Sparkes, 2008) ultimately leading to a ‘blind alley’ (Atkinson, 1997). For Bourdieu, however it is important to not just talk about oneself, but to objectify the position that one occupies in academic space. Indeed, it is this academic space that is a site of power where capital may derive from academic scholarship or, alternatively, represent an institutional power (Bourdieu, 1988). In *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* Bourdieu advocates a “*fundamentally anti-narcissistic*” form of reflexivity (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 72, original emphasis). For a sociologist, this reflexive consideration of oneself is at the core of the *sociological imagination* (Mills, 2000) which aims to understand the ways in which personal biography intersects with the social structure.

As Lyle states “In elevating the primacy of experience, reflexive narrative provides a unique framework...to critically deconstruct that experience” (2009, p. 296). This discussion of Claire’s construction of identity through becoming a leader on an Ed.D programme is a means of critically reflecting on the experience of becoming a leader.

Becoming an Ed.D Leader

Relatively new to the current higher education institution, though, not to the role of lecturer in higher education, the journey to becoming a leader through an Ed.D programme has involved a careful navigation of the social space of the Ed.D in an attempt to establish an identity as a leader of the programme. A social scientist, with a

PhD in sociology and several years of contract research experience, lecturing in an education department, as opposed to within a social sciences department, is accompanied by feelings of being an 'outsider'. The space, both of that of the Ed.D as well as the department, is dominated by former educational practitioners, particularly secondary school teachers, and former FE lecturers. Being in possession of a social sciences PhD is experienced as being unusual in this space as this qualification is not necessarily regarded as an entry requirement for an academic career in an education department. This further added to feelings of being an outsider entering a space of educational practitioners. Viewing the department as focused on developing the profession of education, as opposed to the social scientific study of education has been associated with feelings of being inadequately experienced to take on a leadership role: Even when invited to become involved in the delivery of Ed.D by the then existing leadership team, the emphasis that the Ed.D was distinct from the PhD because of its practice and professional application was perceived as meaning any involvement would be minimal, and perhaps limited to delivering sessions on research methods.

An opportunity to apply for the assistant programme leader of the Ed.D arose, and here the feelings that a social science background, and lacking career experience as a practitioner would be barriers to being considered came to the fore. Names of colleagues, all former school teachers, and who had been employed in the institution for several years were mooted as potential applicants for the role. A perceived lack of intuitional capital resulted in a reluctance to apply. In the end the decision to apply was an active choice, an attempt to reclaim an academic identity and the right to be seriously considered for the role, though without any expectation of success. Additionally, a phase of severe stammering, and a struggle to communicate with ease coincided with the recruitment window. Klein and Hood's (2004) study revealed that people who stammer are likely to believe that their dysfluent negatively impacts on job performance. Indeed, a belief that a leadership role demanded fluency, combined with believing that colleagues would view severe stammering as evidence of being less productive (Jammaers, Zanoni and Hardonk, 2016) made the submission of the application feel like a symbolic gesture. In anticipating that the application would be considered, but ultimately passed over, the actual outcome was different, and

unexpected. This had been the only application for the role. Rather than experiencing relief, avoiding the need for a stressful interview with the potential to exacerbate the stammer even further, a feeling of being denied the opportunity to demonstrate an ability to achieve the role through, open, fair means ensued. Similarly, becoming an assistant programme leader brings with it feelings that this role has been acquired because no-one else wanted it, and that another, able-bodied candidate, had they applied would have been preferred. Thus, taking on this role is associated with feelings of being an 'imposter'.

An identity of leader does not automatically follow from holding the role of leader and continues to be constructed. Challenges continue to be encountered in constructing this identity. Firstly, in relating to the way that disability shapes identity, taking on the leadership role has been associated with disclosing an identity as a disabled academic. Kerschbaum (2014) discusses how there may be negative consequences to disclosing a disability in the academy and this risk had to be calculated. However, disclosing this disabled identity has been part of the process of negotiating adjustments to established working practices, facilitating the role of leader, and in turn the continued development of an identity as leader.

Identifying as a disabled member of the academy may well be an active choice, a decision taken to reclaim power within a space where able bodied practices are normative. However, possessing an 'impairment' is not an agentic choice. Disclosing a disabled identity was a decision resulting from frustrations with expectations of fitting in with abled bodied practices which were experienced as discriminatory and thus can be seen as a means of changing practices to provide an environment which supported a leadership role. For example, on joining the Ed.D team it was common to hold supervision sessions in informal social places, such as a university coffee shop. While this may have been an attempt to democratise the relationship between supervisor and student it acted as a barrier to effective supervision as it was often a struggle to speak fluently against the background noise in such an environment. Similarly, challenges were encountered in managing stammering when tutorials and interviews were held via telephone or skype in a busy office environment. Experienced as an inability to perform the aesthetic labour (Butler, 2014) expected of a leadership role the decision was made

to declare a disabled identity as part of a strategy to address and find solutions to the challenges experienced. More supportive working practices have been negotiated as a consequence, such as supervisions being held in seminar rooms with quieter spaces provided for communicating via telephone and skype.

These supportive working practices have enabled more of the tasks of leadership to be carried out, and with the accomplishment of these tasks is an emerging identity as a leader of the Ed.D programme. However, the sense that these practices are recognised as 'reasonable adjustments', and therefore exist to compensate for impairment remains as others appear to be able to work effectively without them, and thus a perception of being positioned as less effective than abled bodied colleagues (Horton and Tucker, 2014). What is more significant than the changes in the environment in which to carry out tasks associated with leadership has been a change in disposition towards performing aesthetic labour in the form of fluent speech. The effort of trying to produce fluent speech by a person who stammers has been described by Butler (2014) as a form of *emotional labour*. In other words, the strategy of either avoiding speaking, or substituting difficult words with words that are easier to say becomes an additional, burdensome task. It feels that a leadership role on the Ed.D demands efficient communication, a public display of being a competent speaker. People who stammer are more likely to avoid leadership roles (Butler, 2014) so taking on this involved the prospect of continuing to use a emotionally draining strategy to meet expects. However, taking on this role has resulted in choosing not to "comply with the vocal requirements of [the] workplace" (Butler, 2014, p. 728) and instead redefining effective communication as speech which may be dysfluent but which, ultimately, is a more accurate reflection of the intended meaning in speech.

Additionally, an identity as a leader is being constructed in response to the demands of academic leadership of the Ed.D. As has already been noted, it is unusual in this space to not have been an educational practitioner, to describe oneself as a social scientist and to hold a PhD in a social science discipline. The default position of the social scientist is to challenge taken for granted assumptions and to 'make the familiar strange'. Developing this *sociological imagination* in students involves facilitating their critical thinking about the apparent naturalness of social world by inviting them to

consider a different lens through which to view their beliefs and experiences and presenting alternatives accounts and explanations (Mills, 2000). For example, in inviting students to consider ethnic and racial inequalities in education as evidence of racism as opposed to inequalities in social background. However, in the context of delivering sessions on the Ed.D this may be perceived as a personal challenge to the knowledge and experience of the student who often brings with them many years of experience.

These processes of challenging and suggesting alternative ways of seeing things necessarily involves a display of one's own knowledge, a reflection of the reading one has engaged with over the course of an academic career. Awareness of a scholarly body of knowledge is presented as if in opposition to practitioners' experience. Where student resistance to engaging in this process is detected it is sometimes felt necessary to withhold one's knowledge and understanding of a field of study. This is because this knowledge may be viewed with suspicion or rejected as irrelevant to everyday educational practices. In other words, academic knowledge and expertise can be less valued than practitioner's own experiences and interpretations on that experience.

Overall, the Ed.D is experienced as a social space where what can be said, who can say it, the relationships between staff and students (who may also be colleagues from within the Academy), and the forms of knowledge that are accepted have to be negotiated. The Ed.D is a programme that sits within a wider department and university where there are different relationships and accepted practices. Where Ed.D students are also colleagues there are necessarily different relationships with the same individuals in these difference spaces. For example, it is common practice for Ed.D staff communicate with Ed.D students who are simultaneously staff via staff email accounts. On a day to day level, this may be convenient for all parties. However, it contributes to a blending of a student/colleague identity which may, ultimately, be problematic.

Ed.D students may be students, but through using staff email they present themselves as staff to their supervisors and tutors. While this may seem a small issue, the way in which the Ed.D is delivered, via taught sessions supported by a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) means that the way that information is conveyed to students either reinforces or denies their student identity. Some Ed.D students have missed tutorials and supervision meetings and not responded to notifications sent via the VLE because,

as members of staff in the institution they have not checked their student email address. Yet, the university's communication systems have recorded multiple contacts, to which the student has not replied. A leader's role may be to establish lines of communication that all Ed.D students share, but when some of these students are also colleagues, there will be an inevitable blurring.

Continually referred to as a practical and professional doctorate there may be a perception amongst students and other staff that the Ed.D is not only more relevant to practitioner, but is more *do-able* and thus more attainable than a PhD. As such, there is a danger that, by implication the Ed.D is thought of "as a Ph.D.-lite" (Perry, 2012, p. 42) suited to the very cohorts the Ed.D programme attracts. As Salter (2013) warns, there is a danger in viewing the Ed.D in this way, as it necessarily positions itself, its students and graduates as lesser academics. Equally problematic is the rejection by Ed.D students of the PhD as irrelevant to practice as this means it is challenging for Ed.D leaders, especially those with traditional PhDs to have their knowledge and expertise taken seriously within the Ed.D programme.

Conclusions: implications for management and leadership

This paper has explained the positioning of one particular Ed D leader, and the challenges that having a particularly disability (in this case a stammer) have brought to the role. The paper has raised issues associated with routine practices on a professional doctorate where students are often also staff inside the Academy and therefore use their work e-mails for student contact with supervisors, and have tutorials during the work day in social spaces rather than as formal events in office environments. The paper has also raised the issues of differing emphasis inside university Education departments where some are located fervently inside the social sciences, others are more vocationally orientated, and thus the nature and discipline of applying sociological theory still has to be learnt inside such departments.

We have explored some examples of routine practice, from an individual Ed.D leader's perspective, which may not be regarded as generalisable, but illustrate the importance

of local contexts. The exploration of these has served to highlight areas for further development on the Ed.D programme.. Routine practices are often those that are allowed to evolve over time - perhaps like the bad habits of driving a car. This paper has demonstrated that for a professional Ed.D to be a successful, challenging, academic one it needs to be engaged, as a professional programme within the social sciences in an overt manner. Even if, or when, this means that the workload of the Ed.D leadership team is to successfully challenge the thinking on the routine practices engaged in on day-today vocational workload from inside an education department.

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