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Spowart, Lucy

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The alien world of reflective practice: A non-fictional ‘tale’ of academics’ experiences of applying for Senior Fellowship

Lucy Spowart^{a*} and Rebecca Turner^b

^aThe Faculty of Health, Plymouth University, Plymouth, UK; ^bEducational Development, Plymouth University, Plymouth, UK

*corresponding author

The John Bull Building, Research Way, Plymouth, PL6 8BU

Lucy.spowart@plymouth.ac.uk

Twitter: @DrLucySpowart

Abstract

Since the release of the revised version of the UK Professional Standards Framework in 2011, researchers have examined the benefits and challenges of gaining teaching accreditation in the higher education (HE) sector. Here we employ creative nonfiction techniques to stimulate further discussion around the development opportunities associated with gaining Senior Fellowship. This lens permits greater freedom from political agendas that might otherwise remain hidden in our analysis, and therefore offers greater protection to the research participants. The ‘tale’ is constructed from data produced by qualitative interviews with 30 university staff members to illustrate the competing discourses of HE teaching accreditation and teaching quality. The conversation takes place following a presentation about the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) and university league tables. The debate is driven by *Mac*’s cynicism to the accreditation process, and *Josie*’s desire to be recognised for her excellent contribution to raising teaching standards.

Keywords: creative nonfiction; teaching accreditation; teaching quality; reflective practice; senior fellowship

Prologue:

Mac sat slumped in his office chair. His hands hovered above his dusty keyboard as if waiting for the next instruction. He sighed heavily and looked for the umpteenth time at the clock on his wall, whilst reaching for yet another biscuit. It was 8:30pm. He had promised his wife he would be home by 7. 'Shit!' He had been working on his Senior Fellowship application for the past two days, determined to finish it by the weekend. It was now Friday. All he had managed to do was complete the first section and two of the four required case studies. Despite blocking out his diary for most of the day, he had faced a continuum of interruptions: urgent meeting requests about the impending professional body visit, impatient students wanting feedback on essays, birthday cards needing to be signed for admin staff who he didn't even know, and, most recently, a visit from security who had seen his lights on in his office. It felt relentless. He sighed again, simultaneously standing up and shoving his piles of papers aside. He would have to return tomorrow. He knew his wife would not be pleased. She hated it when he went to work at the weekend, but this wasn't something he wanted looming over him any longer.

Introduction

Globally increasing attention is being paid to teaching quality in university settings (Botham, 2018; Shaw, 2018). 'Effective teaching has been broadly understood as teaching that is oriented to and focused on students and their learning' (Devlin &

Samarawickrema, 2010, p. 112). In the UK, this agenda gathered momentum following the introduction of the ‘Teaching Excellence Framework’ (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2015). The Green Paper: *Fulfilling our Potential: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice*, advocated ‘additional incentives to drive up teaching quality’ which is perceived to be ‘variable’ across the sector. One consequence of the rise in the professionalisation of teaching in HE has been the increasing drive for academics to engage with the UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF) and Higher Education Academy (HEA) Fellowships¹ (Shaw, 2018).

The UKPSF (2011) sets out ‘a general description of the activities, knowledge and values central to learning and teaching support roles (Turner et al., 2013, p. 9) and provides an external benchmark via four sets of descriptors for four different levels of fellowship. There is an implicit assumption that through the process of applying for Fellowship, teaching quality will improve. Whilst there is some evidence of this, it is not always the case (Shaw, 2018; Spowart et al, 2019).

Though the UKPSF developed in the UK, it is now an internationally recognised badge of success for those who teach and support learning in HE. Since 2013, when the first non-UK institution was accredited to award HEA fellowships, increasing numbers of institutions worldwide have sought to engage.. Since the release of the revised version of the UKPSF in 2011, several studies have examined the experiences of academics engaging with institutional accreditation schemes (e.g. Pilkington, 2019; Shaw, 2018; Spowart et al, 2019). These have given insights into the perceived benefits and challenges of gaining teaching accreditation.

In this paper we employ creative nonfiction techniques to explore the experiences of university staff applying for Senior Fellowship via an institutional

professional development scheme. Whilst in-house accreditation schemes vary, in our institution staff develop an application consisting of written case studies, in which they align their experiences of teaching and supporting learning to the UKPSF. Applicants are expected to reflect in light of relevant literature and submit a recent peer review of their teaching endorsed by a colleague. Completed applications are submitted for peer review by members of the University community.. Although this paper focuses explicitly on data collected from one UK university, its findings have implications for the development of HE teachers internationally.

Stories of the accreditation journey: Methods and fictional representation

Over the past two decades there has been a trend towards narratives being used to present individual or group experiences (Wellington, 2015). Narrative approaches challenge traditional, scientific approaches and attempt to capture the complexities, rather than ‘single truths’ of social phenomenon. Fictional techniques also protect participants’ anonymity (Clayton, 2015).

Caulley (2008) notes that whilst the word *creative* can imply that facts are in some way distorted, and untruthful, ‘creative nonfiction is deeply committed to the truth’ (p.3). Rather than reporting facts, the goal of creative nonfiction is to ‘move the reader to a deeper understanding of the topic’ (Cheney, 2001, p. 1). That said, we are aware that much controversy surrounds creative nonfiction. Our first task then is to convince potentially resistant readers that our method has academic value.

The discussion that we present here is derived from interview data, and the authors’ experiences of delivering training workshops and writing retreats. Ultimately however, it is a fictional version of events ‘woven from an amalgam of raw data [and]

real details.’ (Yalom, 1991 cited in Clough, 2002, p. 9) that attempts to communicate some typical experiences of staff engaging with the accreditation process.

The fictionalization of educational experience offers researchers the opportunity to import fragments of data from various real events in order to speak to the heart of social consciousness – thus providing the protection of anonymity to the research participants without stripping away the rawness of real happenings. (Clough, 2002, p. 8).

As poststructural researchers, the types of questions that drove the planning of this research, as well as the collection and interpretation of the data, differ from researchers who view data as ‘truth’. For us, knowledge is constructed and subjective. Our awareness of our involvement in the research process, from the initial ideas derived from our positions as Educational Developers, to the framing of our research questions, the gathering and interpretation of the data, and the writing up of this article, necessarily shaped the analytic strategies we employed.

The ‘tale’ we present here was developed from analysis and re-examination of primary data. The following research questions drove the design of the interviews that inform our narrative:

- What does gaining Fellowship mean for experienced teaching staff?
- What are the challenges and opportunities associated with achieving Fellowship?

An online questionnaire was administered to all those who engaged with the scheme in the period 2012-2015. This captured demographic information (e.g. role, discipline) and initial reflections on motivations and experiences. This information whilst not published, was used to inform the interview schedule. To prevent bias, a research assistant, who was not involved in the accreditation scheme, selected a sample

from the questionnaire respondents that was inclusive of staff from each of the six Faculties. Ethical approval was obtained via the Education Faculty's Research Ethics Committee. In total 34 staff were invited for interview and were provided with an information sheet outlining the purpose of the research, our approach to maintaining anonymity, and their right to withdraw. 30 staff agreed to be interviewed. Of these, 24 were applicants for Senior Fellowship. These 24 interviews became the focus of the analysis presented here.

Analysis and representation

Following Smith's (2013) lead, we employed three techniques of narrative analysis: a thematic analysis, a structural analysis, and a dialogical analysis (Riessman, 2008). This is combined with the authors' joint experiences of working in various HE contexts (25 years and 15 years respectively) which informed this 'tale' by way of empathy and understanding. Given the poststructural foundations of this research, it is imperative that there is a recognition and portrayal of *how* our positions as researchers influenced the research process.

As Educational Developers we led training workshops, supported participants through the process of accreditation and have ourselves been successfully through the process of gaining Principal Fellowship. The lead author was also the Manager of the in-house accreditation scheme at the time of data collection.

The standpoint of *storyteller* was then adopted (Smith & Sparkes, 2009) by employing the creative analytical practice of ethnographic creative nonfiction. Our 'story' is constructed from data produced from the qualitative interviews to illustrate the competing discourses of HE teaching accreditation and teaching quality. The expressed experiences of the participants are compressed into the experiences of just two

characters: *Mac*, and *Josie*. The dialogue we present attempts to ‘capture a sense of the subjects’ world’ (Markula & Denison, 2005, p. 168), as it discusses their motivations for seeking accreditation and engaging with the potentially alien worlds of reflective practice and pedagogic literature.

Our goal is to *show* rather than *tell* by employing various fictional techniques (e.g. shifts of tone; characters; scene setting) to represent the complexities and contradictions of the accreditation process. The reader will inevitably make their own meanings, shaped by the extent to which the story maps to their own experiences. There are of course implicit ‘themes’ central to the writing of our tale, and derived from the data, but the story is designed for active rather than passive consumption, to prompt reflection and critical engagement.

Our participants

Mac is an Associate Professor in Humanities. He has been at the University for 20 years, considered by some as part of the ‘old guard’, although a long way from retirement. He came to the University as an established researcher, only anticipated staying a few years, but remained based on early research successes. On joining the University Mac had been required to engage with a teaching course, which he did to ‘tick the box’. He maintained the early mythology associated with these courses (in that they were for teachers NOT researchers), but nonetheless he is committed to his teaching and his students. Mac is what some may call a ‘traditional’ lecturer, didactic but popular with students due to his passion for his subject. Although Mac has kept up with agendas such as research-informed teaching and inclusive assessment, his practice has changed little over the years, and nor does he desire it to. Recently Mac reviewed

the promotion criteria and identified the need to demonstrate ‘excellence’ in teaching. He felt that this was a criterion he could easily demonstrate based on student feedback and his significant teaching experience, but would be endorsed by gaining Senior Fellowship.

Josie is in her early 30’s. She has been at the institution for five years and has risen quickly to Programme Lead. She qualified with a degree in Leisure and Tourism in her 20’s and worked in the private sector for several years before being approached to support the undergraduate students doing work placements. She enjoyed the experience so much that she accepted a part-time Associate Lecturer contract initially, and within two years applied for, and was appointed, to the position of Programme Lead. She now teaches Tourism and Hospitality full-time and regards networking and gaining external recognition as fundamentally important to a successful career in academia. She is an active member of The Women’s Network, through which she has gained a female professor as a mentor. It is no secret that Josie strives to get promoted to Senior Lecturer in the next year or so. Again, gaining Senior Fellowship is not a mandatory criteria for promotion, the criteria for Senior Lecturer are strategically aligned to Descriptor 3 of the UKPSF. Activities the University associates with the role of a Senior Lecturer includes effective academic leadership, providing mentoring support and a successful track record of high quality teaching and learning. These also align with Descriptor 3 of the UKPSF (2011). These are activities Josie is actively engaged with and she feels achieving Senior Fellowship will help her career development, as well her case for promotion.

Setting the scene

Their conversation takes place following a faculty meeting to introduce the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) and the University's response to this agenda. At the meeting, Mac and Josie, two colleagues from this faculty, sit together. They happened to attend the same accreditation workshop earlier in the month. Their conversations are shaped by Mac's cynicism as to the value of the accreditation process and Josie's desire to get the 'job' done.

As the meeting concluded Mac groaned and stretched. His shoulders ached from sitting hunched at this desk late last night, working on his Senior Fellowship application. He was still feeling frustrated that he hadn't got as far as he wanted, and though, as far as he was concerned, it should be an easy thing to write, it was proving tricky. This was annoying him. He was keen to submit his application for a Chair, but wanted to ensure he had thoroughly 'ticked the teaching box' by gaining Senior Fellowship. How could it be so hard! He thought: 'I publish papers in four-star journals; write successful research bids; get good student feedback; so why am I struggling with this?'

Josie looked at Mac, raised her eye-brows, and smiled. "That went on a bit didn't it, eh? Another one of those government agendas we are expected to respond to. Collect this data, report on it in that way, and really what does it mean for teaching? Every time a new agenda comes on the horizon we are expected to jump up and integrate it into our teaching, it feels relentless! Mind you, it may mean that there is more support for us to get our Senior Fellowship applications completed, eh Mac? Surely more staff having those teaching credentials will be good for the University in this brave-new TEF world, eh?"

The ‘Alien World’ of Reflective Practice

Mac gave Josie a wry smile: “You’re sounding as cynical as me Josie” he chuckled. “So how’s it going? At the moment I feel it is one step forward and two steps back with this damn thing! I know the students enjoy what I teach. When I review their exam marks, they are doing well... but how on earth do you say this in the language of the form and all these so-called ‘areas of activity’, core knowledge and values? It’s like double Dutch to me!”

Josie gave Mac a conciliatory glance and nodded. “I know what you mean, it does feel like you have to learn a whole new language. I felt the same when I did the PGCert a few years ago. It was ALL about how you reflect. I mean who has time for that?”

Mac interrupts: “I know; when you think about what they talked about at the workshop, it was demonstrate impact, provide evidence of success, discuss how you have helped others to develop, etcetera, etcetera. I mean, come on...! We don’t have time for that normally, so doing it for this feels a bit forced...contrived even. It also makes me feel that I am not doing a good enough job!”

Mac sighs, again the feelings of frustration resurface, he really is not in the mood to work on this application again today, but it is hanging over him like a dark cloud. The deadline for the submission panel is looming.

Josie sympathises a bit with Mac, though internally she does regard him as rather out of touch. She remembers her colleagues on the teaching course saying similar things, and she did not always agree. Unlike Mac, Josie felt that the idea of reflection was a good idea. She could see the potential benefits to her

teaching practice, such as helping her to develop and acquire new ideas. She also recognised that unless some academics were forced to read about teaching, they probably never would.

Yet the reality of the day to day - departmental politics, competing demands on time – meant that she had little opportunity to implement or change practice beyond her immediate responsibilities. She recalled a past experience and revisited it with Mac: “It’s like when I did the PGCert, we had a big group discussion about reflective practice, as clearly that is considered the ‘gold standard’. On the course they advocated reflecting in one of several ways. They talked of using Brookfield’s lenses, or Schon’s reflection in-action and reflection on-action. And yeah, they did give you a structure to work with, but it’s not like we aren’t thinking about what we are doing. It’s not like we don’t pay attention to what students are doing in lectures, whether they ask questions, or are even awake! But we do it in the moment. We don’t write about it, or go and read about it. We don’t have time for that!”

Mac nodded, what Josie was saying resonated with him; he was in a fog, and unless he tried to look at it differently he wouldn’t get anywhere. He took a swig of luke warm coffee, and turned back to Josie. He realised he hadn’t given her an opportunity to say how she was getting on. “So how are you finding the application process Josie?

Josie shrugged: “Well I see it as something I just have to do; you know I want to apply for promotion, and whilst I have got several good papers, if I can get this under my belt, I think it will stand me in good stead for demonstrating I am excellent at teaching. Rather than spend time worrying about the system and

the 'rules of the game', I like to just get on and 'play the game'. Once I have the Senior Fellowship badge then I will apply for promotion."

Mac nods and smiles to himself. He knows that Josie is an excellent and caring, and she is also very determined. He admires her drive, and wishes he could muster the same level of enthusiasm.

Josie takes a breath and continues, "The way I see it is we have to choose several examples from our teaching, student support and academic leadership and then we have to find the literature to build a case for what we do and what we have achieved. And if I learnt anything from the PGCert, I know that there is A LOT written about teaching and learning in universities."

Mac chuckles, "Don't get me started! That is half the battle...where to start?"

"Ah that's one thing I do have from the teaching course is a good reference list, and to be honest, I have revisited that – I could share it with you if you wanted? And come on, we're academics, we are used to digging into the literature and using it to build an evidence base in support of our research. We're just not used to doing it for our teaching. We need to find a different voice, use a different language and talk about our teaching. I mean how often do we really do that? Okay I know we go to the Programme Leaders forums, where we are supposed to share good practice, but they're just a talking shop. We look at the data on student performance and satisfaction, but we don't actually sit down and talk about our teaching? Apart from my annual peer review or my appraisal I don't talk about my teaching. And though I know there is a huge body of literature out there I just don't have time or cause to look at it. This is FORCING ME to do that. It is actually quite helpful. Once you get past the fact that it is not

your discipline and that you are a novice in it, I found that in a short period of time I could find the references to support my case. That's ALL you need to do."

"That's great", Mac smiles, "There's hope for me yet then."

Josie laughs, hesitates, and carries on, "In a way doing this, reading the literature, it reminds me of the School teaching 'away days' or the annual teaching and learning conference - there are lots of good ideas, but how do we find them, and then, how do we implement them? It's almost like this process opens a can of worms. I feel conflicted; I am looking for evidence of impact for this application, I wouldn't normally do that, and then I am reading about some really interesting ideas and innovations that people have put in place. I should be doing more of this, reading more, thinking more, and even trying new ideas out, but how, when you have so many other things to do?" Josie sighs, exasperated.

Mac wryly smiles "and don't forget the TEF, before you can even think about trying something new, we have to get our head around that! Best pace yourself!" Mac realises that may be a flippant response to a valid concern Josie raised, but he could sympathise with what she was saying. Perhaps that was part of his underlying frustration with this process – it was making him question whether or not he was doing a good enough job".

Mac groaned, shrugged his shoulders, and began to discuss the difficulties he experienced last night: "You've got to get your head into an 'unusual place' that's for sure! Writing about what you're doing and reflecting on your teaching is something that we just don't do on a regular basis. We don't discuss it regularly as lecturers...erm...if at all really. We might talk about curriculum and content and areas within that but we don't talk about actual teaching styles or teaching delivery. It's just alien to me.

Interpreting the ‘tale’

As a framework, the UKPSF has been highly influential, providing a structure through which the practice of HE teachers can be conceptualised. Mac and Josie’s stories illustrate the different motivations for engagement in an institutional accreditation scheme where no specific targets were set, but where there was a strategic ‘push’ to encourage staff to engage. Whilst both were seeking promotion, for Josie teaching is central to her academic identity, and she is enthused by learning from the process. For Mac, research remains his priority and he does not see wider value in the process.

In principal reflective practice should lead to lecturers developing a critical approach to their teaching, stimulating innovation and encouraging risk taking (Kahn et al., 2008). In reality however, it is a challenging process for many to engage with (Kahn et al., 2008; Kandlbinder & Pesta, 2009). Academics are used to thinking, speaking and acting in the language of their discipline (Becher & Trowler, 2001), though they may engage with processes of reflection, it is not an act embodied in the way expected here.

Mac and Josie recognise the need to *demonstrate* reflective practice, and to *draw on* pedagogic literature. These two core components of the in-house accreditation process require considerable work, and potentially a change in behaviour, in order for applications to be successful. Though there is a vast pedagogic evidence-base on which practitioners can draw, the drive for subject currency is most often prioritised by academic staff (Crawford, 2009) and engagement with pedagogic literature is often ad hoc (Kandlbinder & Pesta, 2009). These challenges are a legacy of the historic positioning of teaching-related CPD as a private act, of limited benefit to the wider

community (Henkel, 2000) when compared to research performance (Holywood et al., 2019).

The story represented here is an amalgamation of data. We do not make claims that our representation of the data and construction of the story are more or less legitimate than any other. Certainly, there are other stories that *could* be told. We might have chosen, as we have elsewhere (Spowart et al. 2019) to tease out these facts via thematic analysis and embed them in a realist tale. Just as Mac and Josie's experience of reflection was 'uncomfortable', we also want to challenge our readers. Whilst it is normal practice in academic papers to draw conclusions, we want the story to speak to you and to your experiences. As Jones (2007, p. 161) puts it:

The aim of the conversational format is to assist reflection and understanding, not only of the arguments made but of our personal stance to them. It is in this invitation to reflect on the evidence encased in the differing viewpoints presented that the strength of the arrangement lies.



What do you take from Mac and Josie's story? If the characters are recognisable to you, what can you do to ensure that professional development opportunities for teachers and others supporting learning, provide a truly developmental journey? How can the process of reflection be supported so that participants do not feel as though they are having to learn a new language?

Footnotes

1. In 2018 the HEA as an organisation was subsumed into Advance HE. The name of the HEA Fellowships remains at the time of writing.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Dr Lucy Spowart is an Associate Professor in Clinical Education at Plymouth University, National Teaching Fellow and Principal Fellow of Advance HE. Her main research interests are in CPD, teaching accreditation and impact evaluation.

Dr Rebecca Turner is an Educational Developer and Principal Fellow of Advance HE. Her research interests include examining the role of research and scholarship in college-based HE, and the contribution evaluation can make to educational development.

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