Talk the talk and walk the walk: Are career academics gatekeepers to my tacit knowledge?

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# 1 head

 The Department wishes to appoint an outstanding and inspirational Teaching Fellow in Civil Engineering…. With this in mind, experience of practical engineering design through industry experience is essential. (University of Bath 2017)

The pending Teaching Excellence Framework (BIS 2016) has seen an increase in the number of academic vacancies requiring candidates who possess industrial expertise. This is counter posed to a dominant position of recruitment aimed at satisfying the Research Exercise Framework (REF). REF aligned vacancies are typically staffed by career academics (Tennant et al 2015, Craig et al 2016) with little or no industrial experience and sheltered by academic life. In contrast “Pracademics” (Andrew et al 2014, Pilcher et al 2017) have industrial capital that is essential if universities are serious about their rhetoric on employability:

 Higher Education Providers (HEPs) have a responsibility to engage with student expectations about higher education. For the most part, this is interpreted as supporting students to increase their employability via the embedding of opportunities for work- related learning, personal development and other interventions that enhance human, social and cultural capital. (Artess et al 2017, p.9).

In this opinion paper we argue that the dominance of Career Academics, condoned by the UK Government, vis-a vis “The REF” has stymied the university experience for students in transition from a disciplinary industrial placement, returning to, and through their university studies. An impoverished experience for students is unacceptable given that the Engineering Council (2014, p.13) recognise that placements provide ‘opportunities for students to apply their knowledge and understanding of theoretical concepts to practice and to exercise their professional judgment’. This newly found authentic expertise helps students to contextualize their learning and “must” be incorporated into their learning journey (for the benefit all students and academics) within the formal curriculum and produce evidenced outputs (Lowden et al 2011, Pegg et al 2012). It should not be ignored, through convenience or ignorance, or willful neglect. We recommend a more balanced portfolio of academic staff within faculty, whereby Pracademics are “pivotal” academic staff who “can talk the talk and walk the walk” with these students. Indeed, it is known is that students place value in their academics having had relevant industrial exposure. In a recent survey (Neves and Hillman 2016) of 15,221 students attending universities in the UK, 47% of the students believed that it was very important for academics to have relevant industry or professional expertise compared to 26% of the sample who though it was very important for their academics to be active researchers in their subject. This is also something mirrored in other European countries (Christensen and Erno-Kjolhede 2011)

Students returning to university following employment and/or a short placement period leave behind a Community of Practice (CoP) where their learning has been shaped by collaborative behaviour and tacit knowledge. Anecdotal evidence would suggest that on transition through ‘their’ academic studies, their placement identity remains undisclosed and uncharted territory. Indeed, Allie et al (2009, p. 362) have recommended that faculty should help students develop a range of authentic Engineering identities but they argue that ‘programmes in many higher institutions seem to represent a relatively narrow set of discursive identities, primarily research and academic identities’. Career Academics are perhaps unsuitable role models for such students, largely unable to ‘walk or talk’ industry practice and discourse. Might it be that these academics are fearful, powerful gatekeepers (Anderson and McCune 2013) to the student’s agency to ‘liberate’ their new found identity. Perhaps embarrassed, perhaps grudging, but discombobulated by students who have real industry experience that may be drawn upon to question their reliance of theoretical knowledge as an authority figure in HE? Career Academics retain an academic identity whilst the student has taken on an industrial and professional identity (Case and Jawitz 2003). Pracademics are best placed to identify with the students new identity and both parties will have ‘war stories’ to share about their identity formation, tacit knowledge and the application of theories learned to the fuzzy and often uncertain world of practice. This is uncharted territory for career academics and at best, can only be simulated.

It is noted by Auburn (2007) that a common problem faced by placement students upon their return to university is a dissatisfaction with teaching methods; more specifically, the return to doing the bidding of staff members seems to be unfulfilling having experienced the alternative on placement. Farnsworth et al (2016) explain that this is due to the comparative lack of accountability next to the workplace. Pang (2015) highlights another difference in practice between the two communities, stating that placement students are expected to originate behaviour in the workplace; that is, they are expected to take the initiative and find work to do even when not allocated any, a way of working alien to the undergraduate experience. While the problems that arise from these discrepancies suggest it may be desirable to align the academic and work communities as closely as possible,

The organisational culture within a department may need to be modified to facilitate such developments in accordance with the “ four cultures” asserted by Gibbs et al (2009) cite the works of McNay (1995) and Ramsden (1998) as a means to examine four different cultures as a context for the leadership of teaching. The four cultures provide some assistance in our conceptualisation of the proposed CoP with (1) the bureaucratic culture (students are seen as statistics) and (2) the corporate culture (students are seen as units of resource) ruled out. Alternatively (3) the collegial culture (students are seen as apprentice academics) has some appeal, particularly due to its alignment with Lave and Wenger’s (1992) original research featuring apprentices. However, (4) the entrepreneurial culture where the orientation is to the outside world and where students are seen as partners, rather than customers, offers the most appropriate fit with the vision for our CoP. This approach would open up new opportunities for the construction of a shared curriculum where students have ‘real agency’ to become engaged in ‘their’ higher education. This issue has resonance given the revised National Student Survey (2017) asks students (Q.21) “I feel part of a community of staff and students”. It is vitally important that this community is formed with faculty Career Academics who have a genuine desire to inspire, motivate and excite students through research informed teaching, offset by Pracademics who can temper and apply theories to real engineering projects. This will require more resolve from the TEF than is currently evident and will require appropriate incentives for faculty (Lowden et-al 2011) to incorporate employability measures. As Graham (2016) has posited *Does teaching advance your academic career?*

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