TEACHER IDENTITY IN UNIVERSITY

CLASSROOMS:

REFLEXIVITY AND PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

JANE PEARCE

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Being a report of an investigation submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Murdoch University
I declare that this dissertation is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any institution.

Signed ........................................
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Abstract

Many academics become teachers without the help of formal professional learning. This study explores how a small group of academics have done this. The research aims to uncover the informal, experiential means whereby participants have constructed the knowledge about teaching and learning that underpins their pedagogies. The research begins with the assumption that three key elements play a major role in supporting academics’ informal learning about teaching. These are a person’s previous experiences of learning, their experience of being part of a particular academic environment and their personal or ‘private’ theories about teaching and learning, which are experientially based.

Life narratives were collected from a small group of university teachers who participated in qualitative interviews and provided written evidence of their experiences, practices and philosophies of teaching. The research uses an ethnographic, interpretive approach to collect and analyse data in which participants’ voices are foregrounded. The researcher’s life narratives also form part of the final thesis, demonstrating an ‘engaged’ approach to research and providing explicit evidence of the researcher’s positioning in relation to the subject matter of the thesis.

The research reveals the importance for participants of a ‘teaching self’ or consistent identity that develops in early life and continues through to the adult professional context. This identity forms a basis for participants’ teaching practices.
The challenges experienced by participants when institutional practices do not support or help maintain this identity are discussed, as are the processes whereby participants seek out like-minded colleagues with whom to engage in ‘professional conversations’ about teaching. The research reveals strong connections between participants’ sense of ‘self’ and the principles underpinning their pedagogies, and the thesis concludes with some suggestions about how the concept of the ‘teaching self’ might be used to support all teachers engaged in professional learning. Finally, the research advocates ‘reflexivity’ on the part of teachers, whereby a critical awareness of biography helps locate practice in the cultural and social environment in which it develops.
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