New Academics and Identities: Research as a Process of 'Becoming'

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Abstract

We are new academics involved in the process of becoming researchers. We believe that gathering, reflecting, sharing and producing knowledge are important parts of constructing a strong identity as a researcher that we produce and own rather than being produced by the prevailing academic discourse. We decenter research as a product and bring into focus how as researchers we understand our selves, our work, and our processes. We interweave our stories with those of our research participants who are also new to the professoriate. Our experiences transcend our academic world and we believe that the narratives we discuss may help inform others.

Keywords: researcher development; researcher identity; new academics; publishing and female academics

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Our stories

Cecile: I'm considered a 'new academic' in this context. I've been 'new' several times in my career as I've moved between academia and professional practice. There have been times when research has been at the forefront and times when it has taken a back seat to teaching. Perhaps, in the early days, when I first received my doctorate, I might have considered myself a researcher. Then I moved into teaching adults in rural areas and research did not feature much. When I returned to work at a university my workplace identities still revolved around teaching. I saw myself as primarily a teacher. Moving from South Africa to a faculty position in Canada has changed that. It's a novelty to be now contemplating an identity as a researcher. Yet, the idea of 'researcher' sits uncomfortably with me since it seems to contain images and values to which I have no connection being so practice oriented. I realized that others, mostly women, felt the same way when I joined the faculty.

Heather: I was already an experienced educator and had made my living as a writer for a period of time before entering the academy. However because I'm the only full-time faculty member in my field of art education I might have felt isolated as a new academic. Over the pre-tenure years I've cobbled together my researcher identity and I've found that collaborating with colleagues has been surprisingly important in that regard-it's helped me develop and own my researcher identity. I've explored what collaboration can mean. It's more than just cooperating with others while working in our separate roles for a common project; I've been involved with projects where we share roles or change roles and build on the work of each other.

Our context

We work at a mid-sized university and the only university in Newfoundland and Labrador. The vast distances needed to travel discourage regular interaction with other Canadian and international scholars, although in the age of technological connectivity we are not isolated. The Faculty of Education has in recent decades transitioned into a research-based body nevertheless its ethos remains rooted in teaching practice and the education of pre-service teachers. Many faculty members are drawn from the school system and consequently have less experience with applying for grants, conducting research, and publishing in scholarly journals than faculty members in non-professional disciplines. Because research productivity is a key area for assessment and evaluation for gaining tenure the pressure to publish and to secure research funding is enormous (Polster, 2007). We found that others, like ourselves, were struggling to come to terms with writing, publishing and producing required academic outcomes.

We know that the conditions in which academics write and publish are in a process of transition. For example with the corporatization of universities, increasing emphasis is placed on efficiency and productivity (Hartman & Darab, 2012). However, meaningful personal growth in academic careers suffers under such pressures. Focusing exclusively on the product rather than the process of conducting research reduces satisfaction and academics' sense of fulfillment. In turn positive relationships between faculty members atrophy. Hartman and Darab (2012) go so far as to argue that in the face

of constant deadlines faculty members no longer have time for deep thinking and 'slow scholarship'.

Indeed pressure to write and publish is felt across academic contexts. Most published articles are written by 15% of researchers (Stack, 2003) while the majority of academics experience difficulties in publishing their work (McGrail, Richard & Jones, 2006). In particular non-tenured faculty and women produce fewer publications (Damiano-Teixeira, 2006; Leahey, 2006).

It seems logical then that the literature is replete with calls for interventions to bolster faculty writing output (Campbell, Ellis, & Adebonojo, 2012; McGrail et al., 2006). There is no doubt that non-tenured faculty and women need help, however Akerlind (2008) adds that that development is necessary at a number of career stages due to changing research agendas and needs.

While *products* like journal articles and grants were important to our group of colleagues, larger questions continually surfaced: What does it mean to be a researcher? Is a researcher the same as a scholar? Do I see myself as a researcher? And the one key question that kept surfacing was: Do I belong here?

Our Faculty of Education hired several new faculty members in a short period of time. Both of us were part of this group. Most of the new hires had been educators in the K-12 school system and the move into academia was fraught with anxiety, lack of confidence, and apprehension about the often-invisible performance requirements. Since we formed an informal cohort, we created a writing group that became a space for us to talk about these issues. It was easy to see how difficult all of us found the transition into faculty positions, particularly the research requirements. We (Heather and Cecile), together with another colleague, Rhonda Joy, decided that these discussions were important enough to explore further.

Research project

Our Faculty has an in-house non-peer-reviewed journal called *The Morning Watch: Educational and Social Analysis*, which publishes academic research and discussion papers written by faculty and students. It plays a developmental role and provides a space for first papers for novice writers. We decided to use the journal to explore the idea of *becoming a researcher*. Research as a *product* exists, it *is*. We can see the product of research in book form or as a journal article. It appears quite stable. The researcher, by contrast, is much more elusive. University procedures for tenure and promotion, the discourses we work within and much of our own thinking pivots around the product. We wanted to move the product to the sidelines and explore the *process* of becoming a researcher. This is a more chaotic, troubled and messy engagement. We drew on post-structuralist thinking for inspiration, particularly about the instability of systems and the constant potential for chaos which seemed relevant for the way we perceived doing research. French philosophers and post-structuralists, Deleuze and Guattari portrayed how systems *become* in the open dynamism of thought. They argue that no vocabulary could adequately capture the chaos of life, thus, we interpreted, research (and writing) is not about representation, but invention. Life, research and writing are constantly in a state of change and renewing and always in contact with other influences. Like a rhizome, research "has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing,

intermezzo" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 25). *Becoming* is a series of actions, often repeated, but never in quite the same way. Just as we feel we have become, the process begins anew (Colebrook, 2002).

In 2012, we sent out a Call for Papers for a special edition of *The Morning Watch*. We asked potential participants to initiate conversations and to formalize thinking around the *process* of being a researcher. We emphasized issues of identities 'becoming', and framed the Call for Papers as *Stories of Self* (Arnold, 2011). We planned a collaborative writing process by initiating collegial discussions around proposed submissions, hosting a workshop on narrative writing, and by reviewing papers in a way that was developmental rather than critical. The response, particularly from our own colleagues in the faculty, was astounding. Twenty contributions from within our own faculty and graduate students and some from other faculties were published (Badenhorst, McLeod & Joy, 2012). Several of the papers were from our cohort of 'new academics' but other papers came from 'experienced' long-time researchers.

The papers range from poetry to more formal narratives but almost all were about individuals trying to understand their positionality as researchers and writers. Since there was such an overwhelming response and an obvious interest, we decided to apply for funding to conduct a research project to interview participants who had submitted papers. The key aim of this research was to explore the connections between researcher development and writing/researcher identities. For this, we drew on Akerland (2008) who finds that researcher development includes a focus on feelings about oneself (identity); one's performance (collaboration, development of community, networking); and outcomes (productivity). Akerlind (2008) also outlines four phases in a researcher's development. These include: 1) becoming confident (gaining the research and writing skills to publish); 2) becoming recognized (gaining expertise and becoming part of a research community); 3) becoming productive (gaining the skills to access grants, conduct research and publish regularly); and 4) becoming sophisticated (being a leading thinker in a field).

We wanted to bring into focus how researchers understand themselves, their work, and their processes in relation to Akerlind's (2008) phases. Eight in-depth interviews were conducted and using narrative methods (Polkinghorne, 1995) were video-recorded. All participants who agreed to participate were women, despite the fact that the contributors to the special edition of *The Morning Watch* included both men and women. Using strategies of asking and listening (Spradley, 1979), we asked them to tell us their stories of 'becoming a researcher' by recalling stories about their research, and to examine their researcher identities. Additionally we interviewed participants to explore issues of researcher becomings including experiences of researcher development, meaningful collaboration, and writing identity. The open-ended questions and prompts took the form of a semi-structured interview. In analyzing the data, we read the transcripts numerous times and particularly noted individual participant's self-declared stage of researcher development (Akerland, 2008). We also identified phrases that had to do with collegiality and collaboration such as, "my first project was a collaboration" and, "I want to be part of a research community". As well we identified phrases related to identities as researcher, scholar or writer such as one participant's question of how she could be a researcher, "in a way that's consistent with who I am?"

The outcome of the research

We found that only one of the eight interviewed saw themselves as beyond Akerlind's (2008) first phase: becoming confident (gaining the research and writing skills to publish). Yet, even this is hard to extract as a 'theme' because each person discussed times when they felt confident and other contexts when they did not. What emerged from the interviews was a sense that each did not identify with a single idea of 'researcher'. What defined them and drove them on despite some quite difficult circumstances was a strong interest in the research they were doing and often, the people they worked alongside.

In this paper, we focus on four of the interviews. We selected these interviews because they are all new academics. Here, following the post-structural lead, we present 'slices' of the stories told to us by some of the participants that document the many ways that researchers unfold and emerge. We have cut the stories for the purpose of this paper and have also added summary sentences. There is always an element of re-contextualization when a text is altered. However, we believe that we have stayed 'true' to the stories and the voices they represent, and we have confirmed all quotes for publication with the participants. The participants' names are pseudonyms.

Julia, a participant in our study, did not identify as a researcher in her previous employment as a psychologist, "I was a consumer of research versus being a researcher…I consumed it as in to look at what's the best evidence, what's the best approach."

However, Olivia, previously a teacher, linked her evolving identity with research, "I'm a restless person and once I achieve what I think is the highest or close to the highest level in whatever I'm doing, then I'd like to move on to something more challenging… Research was something more challenging and I have a lot of questions to ask and to find answers for." Olivia discussed how she moved from consuming the theories of others about research methods to coordinating her skills and enacting her own research, "You know reading books doesn't help. I got books about how to interview, how to ask questions, it's kind of like learning to swim, you get all the instructions, you got the manual, how to do it and move your arms and legs... And you learn everything; you even have a coach there showing you how to do it. The coach might jump into the water showing you, but if you don't dip yourself in the water, you'll never learn."

Annette discussed developing as a researcher, "As I publish more and even further pursue my research interests, I think I will even better actualize and identify with that title."

Rachel spoke of her researcher identity as a process of becoming, "I think of myself as an ethnographer, which has sort of been a process of becoming…I think it's still evolving." Using clothing as a metaphor Rachel believed that she could fashion her researcher identity to suit who she was and her agenda for change, "It's been a process of alright how do I be a researcher in a way that's consistent with who I am and what I'm interested in…and it doesn't feel like…I would be wearing some sort of costume… that was really incongruent with who I am and how I think change should happen."

Participants also reflected about how collaborating with others aided their process of becoming a researcher. Olivia connected collaboration to impressive productivity, "My

first project was a collaboration with a peer, so that was very successful and we co-published and co-presented, that was pretty good."

Rachel discussed how through collaborative work she was exposed to new points of view, "It's totally different here because there's way more female researchers…that I have been exposed to…this kind of feminist influence on research has been helpful." Julia spoke of how through collaboration she found encouragement and support and developed long-term relationships, "The colleagues… and the relationships that I've developed keep me here." She continued, "I think I want to be part of a research community."

End thoughts

Heather: Looking back over my time as a new academic I see that collaboration, writing and becoming a researcher are intertwined. My ideas develop while I'm writing (St Pierre, 2007). Thus co-writing articles with others including editing their texts and puzzling out what they mean by their choice of words works in the same way. It moves me from just consuming the concepts of others to analyzing and working with them. Their images and ideas become partially mine. Colleagues have a variety of approaches to producing text and by co-authoring articles with them I've learned from their processes. This cross-fertilization of ideas and exposure to a variety of points of view and methods has worked against possible feelings of isolation. We've created our own supportive community within the faculty and my roots are nurtured by this fertile soil. As a researcher I'm developing towards maturity.

Cecile: Until recently, I've always been a loner when I conduct research and write. The reason for that has had to do with lack of time, multiple responsibilities (mostly revolving around childcare) and few resources. It was a complete joy to work with a group of colleagues who placed support ahead of competition. The interaction, dialogue and collaboration when analyzing data or writing joint papers has taught me much about myself and how I work as a researcher. I've definitely grown and developed much stronger identities. I see myself as much more of a researcher now but one that is supported by a community of researchers.

We have argued here that while publishing scholarly articles makes one a productive academic, sustainable productivity is dependent on the writer/researcher developing identities as such. A collaborative environment helps in the process of identity construction and nurtures researchers who not only produce but also find meaning in what they do. Research indicates that research and writing collaborations lead to greater levels of productivity (Walton et al, 2011; Zutshi, McDonald, & Kalejs, 2012) but we would argue that this is not because of the product, but because of the process of being part of a community, developing confidence and feeling supported (Synder, 2011). A writer/researcher identity that is more solidified leads to better quality research because the researcher is wholly invested, however those identities are defined. The gathering, reflecting, sharing and producing of knowledge is an important part of the process of constructing a strong identity as a researcher that is produced and owned by the researcher, rather than being produced by prevailing academic discourses.

Acknowledgements

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