

Exploring the effects of working practice in cultivating Chinese university teachers' professional identity

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The study explores the effects of working practice in cultivating Chinese university teachers' professional identities. It collects data from questions delivered in a presentation forum and individual interviews. After analysing data the study gets the following findings. Firstly, the reasons for participants choosing to be university teachers include personal interests and job satisfaction. Secondly, after working for some years, participants' professional identities change significantly. They understand their position deeply, becoming more interested in their jobs, setting up more apparent professional goals or missions, and highlighting their moral levels and working ethics. Thirdly, working practice helps participants build clear professional plans. They expect to promote their teaching capabilities, communication abilities, and moral levels. Fourthly, working practice helps participants set up a strong sense of belongingness as university teachers. They care about other's opinions of their group. The findings illustrate that working practice can improve Chinese university teachers' professional identity, which can be explained by

the collectivism of Chinese culture.

Keywords: *Chinese, professional identity, university teacher, working practice*

Introduction

Professional identity is understood as an individual's understanding of one's professional interests, values, identifications, and ambitions (Kira & Balkin, 2014; Vähäsantanen, 2022; Vähäsantanen, Hökkä, Paloniemi, Herranen, & Eteläpelto, 2017). It is one of the most important factors that influence one's attitude and the development of one's career.

Professional identity is an important part of organisational cultures and structures (Billett, 2010; Harteis, 2018). It is at the core of individual and organisational development. Professional identity includes individuals' previous experiences; current professional interests, goals, values, and ambitions; and prospects, orientations, and career plans (Brown, 2015; Kira & Balkin, 2014). Scholars (Miscenko & Day, 2016) believe that the sense of belonging to a group is essential to professional identity as well. Professional identity, therefore, can be revealed by the following questions (Brown, 2015; Kira & Balkin, 2014; Miscenko & Day, 2016): "How have I become a professional?" "Who am I as a professional at the moment?" "Who do I want to become as a professional in the future?" "Who are we together as professionals, or as a group at work?" Scholars have studied professional identity for many years. Previous findings have reported that professional identity is influenced, shaped, and even determined by the social environment (Billett, 2010; Eteläpelto, 2008); and it is changeable and flexible (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Brown, 2015). Thus, it is necessary to study professional identity in different cultures and social environments.

Scholars have proposed some methods to promote professionals' identity, such as the masks method (Leitch, 2010), the professional body method (Vähäsantanen, Hökkä, Paloniemi, Herranen, & Eteläpelto, 2017), and the visual narrative method (Kosonen, 2018). However, those methods are within separate or independent training sessions and work-related interventions (Vähäsantanen, 2022). It is necessary to find ways to improve professional identities in authentic working environments.

In addition, previous studies of professionals' identity are qualitative studies, collecting data with the methods of storytelling (Leitch, 2010; Vähäsantanen, Hökkä, Paloniemi, Herranen, & Eteläpelto, 2017) or interview (Kosonen, 2018). Qualitative research enables researchers to delve into the complexities of human experiences and gain a deeper understanding of the phenomena under investigation, but it usually focuses on limited research subjects. It is better to widen a study's breadth and collect data from diverse participants.

Learning in a workplace is vital for promoting individuals' working skills. Workplace learning provides practical experience in individuals' authentic work environments. It offers individuals opportunities to get skill-based training and gain valuable hands-on skills applied in a particular occupational field (Liu, Liu, & Hariyanto, 2020). Scholars have studied how teachers' emotions affect their workplace learning (Huang, Lee, & Frenzel, 2020) and how workplace learning improves teachers' leadership and self-efficacy (Liu & Hallinger, 2018) in China. This study will explore the effects of working practice in promoting university teachers' professional identity and uncover the relationship between working practice and the professional identity of Chinese university teachers.

Methodology

The study is a qualitative one, approved by the Committee of Ethics and Integrity in Research with Humans at Tianjin Chengjian University. It collected data about Chinese university teachers' viewpoints on the relationship between working practice and their professional identity from a presentation forum and some individual interviews. The research team analysed the collected data back-to-back with each's understanding of the data first, and then with some discussions. Finally, the research team got congruous opinions on the results.

Education departments and universities in China highlight cultivating university teachers' professional ethics and teaching capabilities. Almost every year they offer some face-to-face, online, or hybrid programs to improve teachers' professional ethics and teaching capabilities. Usually, teachers who have teaching experience of fewer than three years are required to participate in these programs. In the summer break of 2021, the first author of the article delivered a presentation on

university teachers' professional identity online in one of the programs. Eight hundred and fifty-five teachers took part in the program. After the presentation, the speaker delivered the following questions in the program forum:

1. What is/are the reason(s) for you to choose being a university teacher?
2. How do your teaching practices change your understanding of being a university teacher, such as your professional goals, missions, interests, values, and ethics?
3. In which way do your teaching practices change your career plans?
4. What does your sense of belonging change after you become a university teacher for some years?

Participants were required to give their opinions on these questions. At the same time, they were asked to comment on their peers' opinions. Finally, 820 participants finished all the discussions. Among them, 434 (52.9%) were female teachers, and 386 (47.1%) were male teachers; 315 teachers (38.4%) were with teaching experience of under one year, 285 teachers (34.8%) between one and two years, and 220 teachers (26.8%) between two and three years. Participants' disciplines are diverse, including arts, engineering, humanities, sciences, and social sciences.

After the participants finished their discussion and the research team finished analysing the data, the research team interviewed 5 female teachers and 5 male teachers; all of them are interested in professional identity; they come from diverse disciplines, with two teachers coming from arts, engineering, humanities, sciences, and social sciences, respectively. They were invited to explain their viewpoints about the relationship between working practice and their professional identity in detail.

Findings

Reasons for participants to be university teachers can be categorised into three kinds. The first is that they like university teaching positions, which was mentioned by 68% of participants. However, the reasons for participants to be university teachers varied. 38% of participants

like teaching and researching; 33% of participants enjoy the high social position that university teachers bring to them; 22% of participants highlight university teachers' salaries; other opinions include a friendly working environment or the opportunities to contact diverse cultures. The second reason is that university teachers are the best choice for their disciplines, which is mentioned by 23% of participants. Those who mention this reason usually come from disciplines of humanity or social sciences. In an interview, one participant tells the research team that her discipline is Chinese Literature, and her interest is writing; she does not like teaching; to make a living and continue her writing, she has to choose a university teacher as her job. The third reason is that participants are influenced by some important persons, which is mentioned by 9% of participants. "My mother is a university teacher. She encourages me to be a university teacher." "My supervisor is an influential scholar in my discipline. He encourages me to be a university teacher." The above are the most representative opinions expressed by participants.

Regarding the changes in their understanding of being university teachers, participants' opinions can be summarised as follows. Becoming more interested in teaching positions is mentioned by 83% of participants. Typical expressions related to this opinion are as follows: "I have found teaching at university is an interesting job." "I have found teaching at a university matches my professional interests." The opinion that working practices have shaped participants' professional goals or missions is expressed by more than 78% of participants. Typical expressions are as follows: "After three years of teaching, I understand deeper than before that as a university teacher I should put the task of cultivating students as my essential duty." "Working as a university teacher for two years, I understand that my professional goal is to cultivate more and more excellent students." Working practices have taught participants that their moral level and working ethics are essential factors in their professional careers, which is expressed by 75% of participants. Typical expressions are as follows: "My teaching practices have taught me that the moral level is more important than the professional level in my career." "I have learned that a good teacher must be a person whose moral level is high."

Regarding the change in participants' career plans, participants' essential opinions are as follows. First, they expect to improve their

teaching capabilities, which is expressed by 95% of participants. Typical expressions are as follows: “As a new teacher, I need to improve my teaching abilities.” “To become a good teacher, I have to learn more teaching abilities.” Second, 92% of participants expect to improve their communication abilities. Typical expressions are as follows: “I want to be friends with my students. I, therefore, expect to improve my communication abilities.” “I am a new teacher in a new working environment. It is an urgent task for me to improve my communication abilities and know my colleagues well.” Third, 85% of participants expect to learn from some model teachers and improve their moral levels. Typical expressions are as follows: “A teacher’s moral level is as important as one’s professional level in the development of one’s career. I, therefore, expect to learn from others and improve my moral levels.” “In students’ eyes, teachers are their examples. To cultivate excellent students, I will try to improve my moral levels.”

Participants’ changes in their sense of belongingness are similar to each other. Before they became university teachers, they usually saw themselves as members of student communities or their families. When they met problems or expected to share something with others, they talked with their classmates or family members. After they become university teachers, they view themselves as community members of their universities and their disciplines. Some typical expressions are as follows: “I often share teaching skills with teachers at my university. I believe we have similar questions in teaching and can help each other.” “I often participate in conferences related to my discipline, in which I can meet peers who can transfer their research experience to me.” “I enjoy making friends with university teachers as we have similar interests and professional aims.” Participants believe all university teachers in China are in a community. They care about other’s opinions of their community. “All university teachers have to establish a responsible and knowledgeable social status for university teachers. I believe the majority of university teachers are with high moral levels. Those with bad behaviours are few. They should be eliminated from the group. We are different from them.” One university teacher tells the research team in a review. The aforementioned data show that university teachers see themselves as a community. They highlight other’s viewpoints toward the community.

Discussion and conclusion

The research findings reveal that the reasons for participants to be university teachers include personal interests and job satisfaction (high social position or salary), which is similar to the opinion of a previous study (Tang, 2019). China is a developing country growing fast. Ordinary individuals in China are neither very rich nor very poor. When they select jobs, they usually think about both their interests and their sense of satisfaction with the job.

After working for one to three years, participants' professional identities changed significantly. They understand their position deeply, becoming more interested in their jobs, setting up more apparent professional goals or missions, and highlighting their moral levels and working ethics. These changes can be explained by the term core reflection, which is regarded as an academic's professional orientation (Korthagen, 2004). A period of job practice helps participants realize that their positions can help them achieve their values, which strengthens their core reflection and confirms their professional orientation. Thus, participants set up clearer professional goals or missions. A previous study has reported that individuals become more aware of their career qualities through core reflection, and thus core reflection leads to self-understanding of one's job choice (Arvaja, 2018). It is still not clear whether job practice influences one's core reflection or core reflection affects one's career, or whether the two factors influence each other mutually, which is required to be studied in the future.

Working practice helps participants build clear professional plans. They expect to improve their teaching capabilities, communication abilities, and moral levels. A previous study has reported that university teachers' work encompasses a range of tasks, including educational responsibility and technology-enhanced duties (Fejes & Köpsén, 2014). The current study finds that Chinese university teachers highlight improving their moral levels, which reveals the differences in university teachers' duties in different countries. According to Chinese culture, only a knowledgeable person with a high moral level can become a teacher; teachers are regarded as other persons' models on a moral level. Chinese teachers, therefore, highlight improving their moral levels.

Working practice helps participants build a strong sense of belongingness as university teachers. They care about other's opinions

of their group. Previous studies have reported that Chinese university teachers hold a strong collective professional identity (Yao, 2020; 2021), which is similar to the findings of the current study. Chinese culture highlights collectivism. Individuals in China are willing to contribute to a group. They care about others' opinions of their group more than toward them. Chinese culture cultivates Chinese university teachers' strong sense of belongingness as university teachers.

The study reveals the effects of working practice in cultivating Chinese university teachers' professional identities. The findings of the study have uncovered the hallmark of Chinese university teachers' professional identities. Strategies for building adaptability and a supportive work environment can be developed based on the findings of the study. The study has significant implications as well. Firstly, teacher schools are required to pay more attention to working practices in fostering future teachers' professional identities. Secondly, school managers don't have to worry about novice teachers' professional identities too much, as their professional identities can be improved by their working practice. Thirdly, findings in the study can help adult educators in adapting to new work environments and fostering a sense of belonging within educational institutions; Strategies for building adaptability and a supportive work environment can be developed based on these insights.

As we know, Chinese culture has influenced countries in East Asia and Southeast Asia deeply. These countries highlight collectivism as well. The findings in the study, therefore, can reveal the relationship between working practice and the professional identity of university teachers in other countries in East Asia and Southeast Asia.

Looking back on the current study, we find some limitations. Firstly, the research gets data from participants' retrospective information, which may decrease the vitality of the study. Secondly, the study expects to explore the effects of working practice in cultivating university teachers' professional identities. However, during their working period, university teachers have participated in some training programs, such as the summer training program from which the study gets the data. It is better to explore the effects of working practice in cultivating teachers' professional identity without the interruption of other factors, such as pieces training. Thirdly, parts of the data are collected by the

method of interview. Due to time limitations, the study only reviewed 10 participants. It is better to enlarge the number of participants reviewed in a study.

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