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Shaping the identity of novice academics: strategies for support professional development

Abstract

Studies on professional development and the construction of teaching identities in Higher Education point to the need to review the induction process for novice academics and to establish programmes that support their inclusion in the university. This article analyses such a programme, focusing on strategies used to construct an academic teaching identity. The results allowed participants to feel included, to construct rational guidelines for teaching, and to construct clear scenarios for understanding their tasks within the institution. However, the results also highlight the need to integrate the research side into the programme, thus helping them to construct a global academic identity that integrates the teaching self and the investigating self.

Keywords

Academic identity, novice academics, academic teaching development, higher education

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1 Introduction

The profound transformation that the European university system is currently experiencing has specific implications for beginning or novice academics, especially in the way that they are being socialized professionally and the way in which they are dealing with the challenges, both in teaching and research, that are inherent to academia (KNIGHT, 2005).

Being aware of this issue, the European Union's High Level Group on the Modernisation of Higher Education recommends that by 2020 all teaching staff in higher education institutions must have received certified pedagogical training and that decisions related to the career stages of academics (entrance, progression and promotion) should include mechanisms that assess teaching performance as a major factor (EU HIGH LEVEL GROUP, 2013). The ultimate goal of these recommendations is to optimise the quality of teaching and learning in Higher Education (HE), which encompasses the understanding that academic development programmes are a key element in positioning Europe with the knowledge society.

The professional development of academics is a multidimensional concept (UWAMARIYA & MUKAMURERA, 2005). It is understood as a process that is flexible, on-going and characterised by the continual reflection on daily experience (DAY, 2006). This professional development consists of constructing a new professional culture that goes beyond the acquisition of new skills. It is conceived as a collaborative process that brings greater benefits to meaningful interactions with other teachers, all while continuing to provide space for work and personal reflection. This conceptualisation considers teaching staff to be active apprentices who are committed to preparing, observing and reflecting upon their teaching practice (FEIXAS & EULER, 2013).

Professional development refers to the professional growth that teachers gain from their experience and the systematic examination of their teaching practice. The process is part of a continuum that begins with initial training and continues throughout the entire teaching career (UWAMARIYA & MUKAMURERA, 2005) through a dynamic relation between phases that takes into account biographical

experiences, environmental factors and professional promotion, among other factors. This multiplicity of factors, which unfold throughout one's "professional time", bases the concept of teaching development on another important concept, namely that of professional identity.

A professional identity is a personal entity that teachers construct based on their relationship with their workplace and professional peer group, within a specific institutional context (MARCELO & VAILLANT, 2009). The nature of that identity is dynamic and undergoes continual transformation, but at the same time there is permanence and stability over time. It is the product of interaction with others who are in the process of continuous construction and reconstruction (DUBAR, 2001; SHERIDAN, 2013).

Under such a perspective, identity construction is a relational process. A professional identity can be conceptualised as a product of the interaction between personal experiences and the social, cultural and institutional surroundings in which they perform their daily functions (KREBER, 2010; SHERIDAN, 2013; CABALLERO & BOLÍVAR, 2015). The construction of their identity begins to emerge in the course of initial socialisation and later during the process of initial training, in which a corpus of competencies is built and a specific knowledge is internalized (GEWERC, 2011).

The scientific literature identifies and analyses the key elements that are present in both the construction and transformation of university teachers' identity. One element is the representations that academics create (MONEREO & BADIA, 2011) about what it means to be a university teacher and what is expected of them. These representations play an important role in constructing their identity and have a biographical basis: their personal history as a student in relation to university teachers (KREBER, 2010), especially with those who have accompanied them throughout their studies and research (GEWERC, 2011). A second element is related to the specific social and cultural environment of the university, particularly in terms of representations of the teaching role of academics, the process of teaching and learning, and the feelings associated with teaching. MONEREO & BADIA (2011)

maintain that these representations are located at the core of a teaching identity. A third element is the interaction academics have with the various agents (colleagues, social agents, institutional agents) that share their professional life. As academic identities are built upon personal reflection, the teachers receive for their work from such agents plays a vital role (VANHULLE, 2008; LEIBOWITZ et al., 2014). The relations that are forged while academics perform their professional duties affect their identity by shaping it, validating it, or transforming it (CABALLERO & BOLÍVAR, 2015).

How do we realise the process of academic teaching development and of constructing teaching identities in institutions of HE? To address this question it is necessary to pay attention to specific contexts. Although we are speaking of HE in a generic sense, the guidelines for accessing and being promoted within the university and the cultural context in which a university is embedded vary greatly from country to country, and diverse governmental initiatives govern their development (GONZÁLEZ JIMÉNEZ et al., 2006).

In the Spanish university context, novice academics tend to be young and are recent graduates or have recently been awarded a doctorate degree; in some cases they have some prior professional experience and a few years of teaching at a university. They obtain a position at the university, whether as a teaching assistant, a lecturer or a fellow, and typically they have not received any specific guidance as teachers. These novice academics are knowledgeable about their subject matter, but typically they haven't received any training in how to teach it (MARGALEF, 2005; JARAUTA-BORRASCA & MEDINA-MOYA, 2009). It has been observed that novice academics generally need attention, as in many cases they find themselves to be insecure, lacking in confidence and trying to establish their own professional and personal identities. Moreover, the recent financial crisis has made things more difficult for these young academics who have seen that, despite their best efforts, promotion within the university has slowed or even stopped in some cases, which imposes a serious delay on accessing higher posts and progressing in their academic careers.

In Spain, training in teaching is not required. For over a decade, various proposals for supporting the development of novice academics have been put forth (SÁNCHEZ & MAYOR, 2006; FERNÁNDEZ MARCH, 2008), but they have not been generalised.

The characteristics of the support programmes that have been developed to date are varied, but studies show that when considering academic teaching development processes, the following aspects should be taken into account (DAY, 2006; RIOPEL, 2008; BOZU & MANOLESCU, 2010; FAVE-BONNET, 2011; TREDE et al, 2012):

- The importance that the professional trajectory has on the way that academics join the training programme;
- The relationship between novice academics' motivations and the meaning they attribute to the training programme;
- Novice academics' deployment of strategies that are in line with their own professional trajectory and motivations, which are at the core of their identity project;
- The inclusion of an emotional element and a sense of the participants' personal trajectory, institutional environment and professional trajectory.

Furthermore, professional development begins with an initial training, the first phase of a continuum, which is made up of three main components (MARCELO & VAILLANT, 2009; DONNAY & CHARLIER, 2008; LEWIS, 2014).

- A cognitive process. This deals with the normative knowledge schemas that structure professional thought, through individual and group experiences. This triggers a process of interaction between theory and practice in which theoretical resources are used to seek out solutions for problems in practice.
- A collaborative process. This involves collaborative actions within an institutional climate of support and aid among colleagues, sharing knowledge, feelings and experiences among peers.

- Reflection upon the professional activity itself as a strategy for the continuous review, analysis and improvement of practice. This contributes to the enrichment of teachers' knowledge and professional notions and to the development of attitudes about their own teaching performance, strengthening their confidence and feelings of professional responsibility.

In this paper we present our experience at the University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU) with a support programme for novice academics. In recent years the university has followed an educational model called Cooperative and Dynamic Learning (IKD, for its name in Basque), which is understood as a common framework in which the university community works together to develop educational practice and contexts for development in certain key areas. At the same time, the resulting transfer between generations of academics has created a new phenomenon, namely the professional inclusion of more than 500 teachers in a short period of time. This affects the people who enter the university as faculty members as well as the university campuses, which must renew their academic staff in order to guarantee the quality of their programmes and student learning.

2 Supporting new faculty at the University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU): strategies for developing teaching identity

When we began designing our programme, we started with some fundamental questions: How do we create the professional identity of teaching staff at UPV/EHU? What strategies will enable them to re-create their identity as university teachers? What professional plan do they bring to a training programme? How might the identity-related strategies that each person uses to reconstruct their approach to identity affect the training process?

At UPV/EHU, novice academics are those who have passed a public competitive examination, who have an accreditation as adjunct professor from an external

agency, and who have had at least two years of teaching experience while holding a full-time contract.

Our programme aims to help faculty integrate into the university by primarily shaping their professional identities as teachers at UPV/EHU, from the perspective of the IKD model. The programme lasts for a year and a half and carries a workload of 26 ECTS, many of which are for face-to-face sessions, although there is also a significant amount of individual and classroom implementation work. The phases have been designed so that they:

- promote a process for accrediting previous teaching experience;
- guarantee support in aspects that are considered essential, particularly those related to the construction of a teaching identity at UPV/EHU and implementing active methodologies in at least 30% of degree courses;
- allow a significant amount of time (a third of total training time) to complete different activities based on participants' own professional learning plan and taking advantage of the different options offered by UPV/EHU or other institutions.

The programme consists of five phases:

1. Institutional welcome. Members of the Rector's Office explain the basic aspects of university operation, research, multilingualism, professional advancement, etc.
2. Module on constructing a professional identity as a teacher at UPV/EHU: a professional learning plan. The key is to make novices the owners of their training process, analysing their previous experience and projecting their future within the university while also acknowledging their prior professional experience.
3. Thematic Workshops. As each novice engages in self-analysis and defines their professional learning project, specific training needs arise and they are addressed within that specific context.
4. Module on training in active methodologies. Novice academics design a course that uses case methods, problem-based learning and project-based

learning; they later implement their design in the classroom, and it is externally assessed.

5. Closing: portfolio and group interview. The portfolio contains the evidence of learning that novices have collected and their reflections on the training process as a whole; the group interview consists of the evaluation of the process.

In this paper we will not discuss the programme as a whole; instead we focus on the learning that has taken place during the second phase, the module on constructing a professional teaching identity. This module lasts 50 hours and is split between face-to-face sessions (five 4-hour sessions over three months) and personal on-line work done outside the sessions (30 hours).

The module establishes processes for both individual and group reflection, (DAY, 2006; SHERIDAN, 2013) which has three stages (Figure 1). The first stage sets participants the task of writing their professional life history (KREBER, 2010) by reconstructing how they became university teachers and what occurred during this process; this level triggers emotional aspects, personal constellations of motivations and aspirations, conceptions and challenges, worries and difficulties encountered along the way (MONEREO & BADIA, 2011). The second stage focuses on the institutional level; that is, it highlights recognition of the environment in which participants will develop professionally, particularly in terms of what the university wishes to accomplish in its public mission (VANHULLE, 2008). The work at this stage focuses on a collaborative approach (DONNAY & CHARLIER, 2008; LEWIS, 2014) in which groups formulate the professional competencies that they need to develop in order to contribute effectively to the university's mission. This helps them to apprehend the academic and institutional culture that they are joining and in which they will be socialised as academics (LEIBOWITZ et.al. 2014). The process culminates in the third stage, in which each participant writes a professional learning plan that establishes a set of staggered goals that are in line with their personal needs and the institution's needs, shaping their own professional identity within the university (CABALLERO & BOLIVAR, 2015).

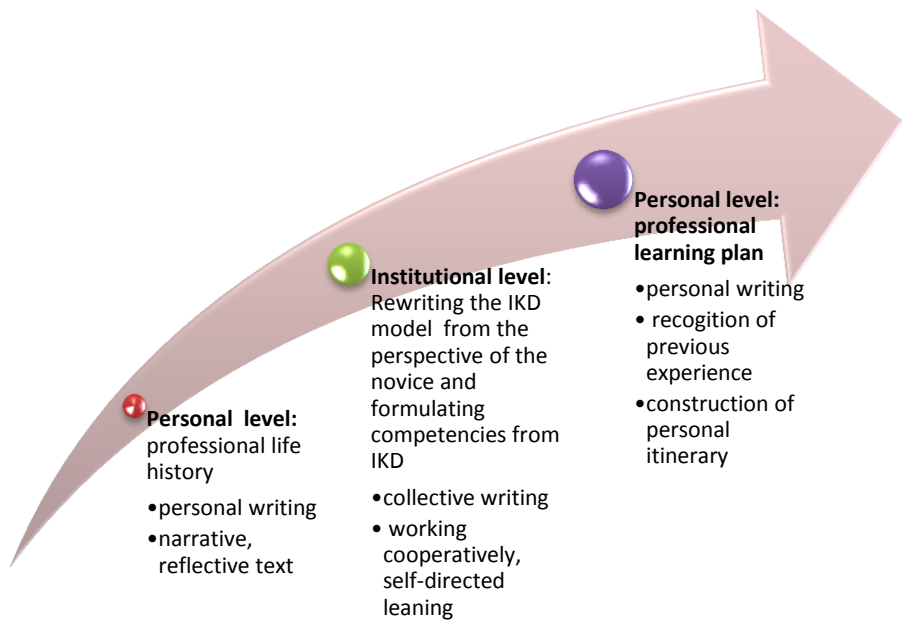


Figure 1: Methodological-guiding schema for the construction of a teaching identity at UPV/EHU

3 Methodology

Our study aims to arrive at an in-depth understanding of how this module affects the construction of academic identity for a group of novice teachers at UPV/EHU. A qualitative-phenomenological methodology was adopted, and the instruments used to collect data were life histories, individual reflections on the impact of the module’s three stages (on-line work), and one to one interviews with participants regarding their professional learning.

The method used for analysing the data was the constant comparative method put forth by GLASER & STRAUSS (1967), which is a generative, structured and in-

ductive approach that combines the inductive coding of categories though constantly comparing them against each other. The categories were built on the opinions, attitudes, feelings, perceptions of change, evaluations and dysfunctions that appeared in the data collected.

The qualitative data have been categorised in a way that makes the process of constructing an academic teaching identity clear by triangulating text units with the aim of showing their density and consistency. This category analysis allowed us to identify numerous elements of the process and their occurrence in participating faculty members.

The results are related to the group under study, namely the 15 novice academics who participated in the programme. The results are valid within this context, though the conclusions can be extended to the class of adjunct professors (naturalistic generalizations).

4 Results

Shaping academics' teaching identity at UPV/EHU is a fundamental element of our programme. Although a university teaching identity emerges from a gradual and historical process, it can be facilitated and accelerated by accessible training processes (SHERIDAN, 2013).

Participants initially felt disoriented, but that was clearly overcome by the reflective strategies and the collaborative work in a peer group. The module started with participants writing narratives of their professional life, which expressed what they were currently learning and was based on their projections of new training goals. Through their narratives, participants gave an internal coherence to their history and, as protagonists, they worked on shaping the professional identity that would be unique to them throughout their career. Lived experiences are unique and unrepeatable, as is the interpretation that each person gives to those experiences at the moment at which they reflect upon them. The narrative strategies allowed them to express a before, a during, and an after, in a re-signified manner that made partici-

pants feel that they are owners of their process and co-participants in a broader collective endeavour

“I see this training process as a tunnel, where the beginning is what I have achieved up to now, that is, my history as a teaching professional, which I wrote at the beginning of the course, and then the end (the light), is my training in line with what the institution asks of me through the IKD model as a member of the university. Meanwhile, to arrive at that end I need to keep moving toward the light that I see, I can’t stop in the middle of the tunnel, the only way to do it is to create my own training plan starting with my teaching history (the mouth of the tunnel) and setting the IKD document as a goal (the light)” (P3, female).

These identity constructions are influenced by the environment in which novices work, as well as by their own beliefs, experiences and ideas of what it means to be an academic at the university. Frequent reflection and the rigorous use of language are key aspects that enabled participants to be aware of their previous paths and their future projections, which is also supported in KREBER (2010) and SHERIDAN (2013). The tensions that arise between what is and what is desired are the starting points for learning and improvement.

“I have become aware of what is asked of a “complete” university teacher in terms of teaching matters [...] and this has let me find the points where I have better or worse training, which is useful when I’m carrying out my learning plan [...] As an exercise of reflection and introspection, I think that has been good for me to get some perspective, think about how I’ve improved in only a few years, what I have gained and lost, what I still need” (P12, female).

“[Starting] from my own professional history [...] allowed me to detect my biggest gaps in teaching (gaps that have always been there and that I knew I had, but I had never stopped to really think about them) and going

through the IKD module and the competencies, that logically established the bases to be kept in mind to guide our training” (P2, female).

Meanwhile, constructing the academic teaching identity was tied in a meaningful way to the university’s explicit educational model, to its institutional goals and its public and social commitments. From this perspective, the work of reflectively analysing the IKD educational model became a fundamental aspect that helped outline the identity of each novice, a point of departure that will later combine with the processing and implementation of active methodologies within their teaching practice.

“The union of the four parameters from the document that we were given as the IKD template has allowed me to close a cycle of considerations that were teeming in my head but that hadn’t come together into a theoretical “corpus”, as a coherent unit when viewed from different overlapping strands” (P6, female).

“One of the basic ideas that I internalised was: the teacher should guide the learning process, using active methodologies to facilitate autonomous and meaningful learning in students” (P8, male).

For this reason, putting time aside to engage in conscious and frequent reflection on one’s own learning and practice as a teacher, traits that are characteristic of reflective professionals, emerged as an indispensable requirement in training novice academics.

“What I would highlight most is the reflective and critical attitude that I developed. Recalling my first experience as a teacher through narrative was also something that I never would have done, and just the act of writing and reading it made me remember important things about myself. Thinking constantly about whether what I present would be ok or not, that is, fostering critical and reflective reasoning/thought is not only applicable to teaching, but also to life itself” (P5, female).

But exercising a profession involves taking responsibility for specific tasks and carrying them out personally. Our programme has been a way for participants to learn different ways of being a teacher, the idea being that they would learn to be and do through experiential learning, such that their activation as responsible and cooperative apprentices determined the process.

“The way that the course facilitators have guided our work, without intervening too much, letting us attempt to answer our questions and solve our problems ourselves, for example, in terms of organisation, is something to keep in mind when it is time to put active methodologies into practice in the classroom with our students. In fact, from my point of view, this was another of the objectives of this phase: be aware and capable of learning how we learn (and thus keeping it in mind in the teaching-learning process)” (P2, female).

Collaboration, which as a value and strategy at the core of IKD and runs through our programme, was highly regarded and appreciated by the participants, both for learning and professional development and as a methodology apply in their teaching practice.

“Of course interacting with faculty who share many of your hopes and concerns turns any process (in this case learning with active methodologies, with IKD, in developing competencies, etc.) into an enjoyable and enriching journey” (P5, female).

5 Discussion

As we have shown in this paper, constructing an academic teaching identity is a complex, profound and tacit process. Through reflective processes this tacit knowledge was brought to the surface, where it was verbalised, analysed and contrasted within the group environment and re-personalised within the professional learning plan that signalled the journey that each novice academic followed throughout most of the programme.

The expressions of this process were manifested in different ways, allowing us to make inferences about participants' process of constructing their identity as teachers, a type of self-determination as teachers, where participants became increasingly aware and began making informed decisions.

Moreover, the pedagogical devices implemented in the training programme helped novice academics to specify, clarify and broaden the meaning of their role and duties. It was a process in which tensions emerged and strategies linked to their trajectory and professional identity project were deployed, a process which the studies of FAVE-BONNET (2011) also attest.

It is worth paying some attention to the tensions related to identity (PRADOS et al., 2013) that emerged. One such tension, which was quite widespread, was the formulation of questions about the perception of what good teaching is, perceptions that they believed they had until that moment. A second significant tension arose in determining deficiencies or major gaps in competencies, strategies, and knowledge specific to teaching. A third tension appeared when participants had to write reflectively about their tasks and their own learning process, complementing their own experience with bibliographical sources that supported their statements, thus bringing their discourse and their own representations to a more professional level. These questions led them to begin to consider more consistently and effectively the image they desired to have as teachers, because they had acquired the fundamentals and they recognised the weaknesses they must overcome (CABALLERO & BOLÍVAR, 2015). Thus, they began to search for the paths that would allow them to move towards the image of the effective and reflective teacher that they constructed during the training process.

From the tensions mentioned above, the participants deployed identity-related strategies to shorten the distance between their current image and their desired or ideal image, and to increase their distance from an image they wanted to avoid. Participants did not use the same strategy in this process; the strategy chosen was not only related to the content of the training programme, it was also fundamentally related to each participant's personal and professional trajectory, to the human,

material and social resources of the university environment in which they work, and to their own view of professional development (JARAUTA-BORRASCA & MEDINA-MOYA, 2009; FAVE-BONNET, 2011).

The programme contributed to the novice's construction and development of enough scenarios that enabled them to theorise on their own practice, to understand it in greater depth, and to have greater conceptual clarity about teaching; this gave them the meaning and the base that will support their teaching practice. This degree of depth in understanding teaching led them to make changes in their relationship to teaching, in the teaching-learning process, and particularly in the classroom. It is important to recognise, as do POSTAREFF, LINDBLOM-YLÄNE & NEVGI (2008) and TREDE et al. (2012), that in order for the effects of pedagogical training to last, habitual reflection on and about one's teaching practice must be established, allowing academics to interpret and analyse their teaching. It seems that the novice academics also adopted a more critical and reflective attitude toward their own practice, leading to more reflective professional development, as other researchers have observed (JARAUTA-BORRASCA & MEDINA-MOYA, 2009; SHERIDAN, 2013). Participants were able to apply what they had learned and transfer it to other academic situations, such as preparing themselves for calls for academic promotion (at the aggregate level) and carrying out projects in educational innovation.

The contribution that this induction programme makes to the construction of teaching identity has some limitations, however. First, this is a small-scale experience and it should be taken as a pilot study that needs to be analysed with larger groups; two additional editions of the programme have been run with a total of 30 additional participants, and our understanding of the process remains very similar. Second, participants have noted a conceptual limitation, one which we consider to be a significant gap. What is missing in the induction programme is a research component. An academic's teaching identity and researching identity should be constructed in an integrated way, thereby constructing an "academic being" and moving to a more ambitious and holistic level. Ernest BOYER's contributions (1990) are, without doubt, a source of inspiration that has not yet bloomed at the strategic level, but

they should push us to think more about the types of support that are needed in order to construct an “academic” identity that is more sensitive to the real world and overcomes the dichotomies that do little to promote the quality of Higher Education. Research that analyse training programmes through this dual, integrated perspective will make significant contributions to academic development.

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