

**When, where and how am I now?**

**Researching identity in university communities of practice**

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**Abstract**

The establishment of communities of practice (CoPs) has emerged nationally as a strategy to promote 'excellence' in teaching and learning in Australian universities. CoPs in Australian universities have been reported as fostering the development of identity in practice and collegial academic identity. In these accounts identity development is associated with storytelling around everyday practice, although the relationship between narrative and identity development has not been explored or described in detail. Similarly, although the complex and changeable university contexts in which these CoPs operate is noted and described in the literature, there is currently no detailed account published of the relationship between the broader discourses that shape these contexts and the process of identity development in university CoPs. We argue in this paper that there is a need for a new way of researching identity formation in university CoPs. Drawing on Trinh Minh Ha's work (1992), we propose that fragmentation be used as a working metaphor for thinking about and researching identity development in university CoPs, with direct reference to the contexts in which they operate.

The proposed new approach takes into account the complexities and variety of discourses that influence identity formation in CoPs and the changeable and sometimes contradictory Enterprise University contexts in which Australian CoPs operate. In this paper fragmentation is described and applied to the process of researching identity formation in university CoPs. This paper also describes how fragmentation guides the combined narrative research and discourse analysis methods used in the proposed approach. This paper argues that fragmentation provides the means for developing practical (or experiential) insights as well as conceptually structuring a useful method for investigating discursive factors, to open up a variety of potential new understandings about identity formation in university CoPs.

## Introduction

In recent years the establishment of communities of practice (CoPs) has emerged nationally as a strategy to promote 'excellence' in teaching and learning in Australian universities (Australian Learning and Teaching Council, 2011). Excellence in teaching and learning is a contested term. In this paper it will be considered in terms of quality associated with a discourse of excellence transposed to higher education from industry and focused on quality and accountability, competitiveness and efficiency; and in terms of quality associated with inclusivity and diversity, collaboration and systemic change.

CoPs in Australian universities have been reported as fostering the development of identity in practice (for example, (McDonald & Star, 2006), (Hort et al., 2008; McDonald et al., 2008), (Australian Learning and Teaching Council, 2011; Star & McDonald, accepted for publication a) and collegial academic identity (for example, (Churchman & King, 2009; Churchman & Stehlik, 2007)). In these accounts identity development is associated with storytelling around everyday practice, although the relationship between narrative and identity development has not been explored or described in detail. Similarly, although the complex and changeable university contexts in which these CoPs operate is noted and described in the literature, there is currently no detailed account published of the relationship between the broader discourses that shape these contexts and the process of identity development in university CoPs.

We argue in this paper that there is a need for a new way of researching identity formation in university CoPs. We propose that fragmentation be used as a working metaphor for thinking about and researching identity development in university CoPs, with direct reference to the contexts in which they operate. By working metaphor we mean a conceptual model that shapes thinking and action to 'live by'. In proposing fragmentation as a working metaphor, this paper follows Lakoff and Johnson in their contention that 'Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature' (1980, p 3). Thinking and action unite in experience. This makes a working metaphor particularly useful for researching the impact of participation in CoPs as groups of people who 'share a passion for something they know how to do and interact regularly to learn how to do it better' (Wenger, 2004).

In searching for a metaphor to structure the conceptualisation and description of the proposed new research approach described in this paper we are drawn to the potentialities that open out and proliferate in the multiple associations made possible by metaphor. As Dixon, Ferguson, Hay, Moss and White (2004) state 'We use metaphors because of their elusive, yet practical nature. They make concrete that which is abstract' (p 13). We are, however, also cautious about the possibilities that choosing a metaphor excludes. Equally, we are cautious about adopting, let alone proposing, a

research approach that seeks closure in order to reconcile difference and respond to the 'real world' of experience (MacLure, 2006, p 730).

With these cautions in mind, this paper will describe the proposed metaphor of fragmentation and apply it to identity formation in Australian university CoPs as well as to the broader higher education contexts in which they operate. This paper will argue that fragmentation provides practical (experiential) insights as well as opening up useful new understandings for researching identity formation in university CoPs.

## **Fragmentation**

### *When, where and how am I now? Identity and hybridity*

The notion of fragmentation as the process of identity formation draws on Trinh Minh-Ha's description of identity construction in the context of cultural hybridity. Trinh describes this as a 'way of living with differences without turning them into opposites, nor trying to assimilate them out of insecurity.' (1992, p 156). She proposes that 'Since the self ... is not so much a core as a process, one finds oneself, in the context of cultural hybridity, always pushing one's questioning of oneself to the limit of what one is and what one is not.' (Trinh, 1992, p 156). For Trinh this process makes it possible for her to question her condition in the understanding that 'the personal is cultural, historical or political'. As she puts it, 'The reflexive question asked, ..., is no longer: *Who* am I? but *when, where and how* am I (so and so)?' (Trinh, 1992, p 157). In pursuing this question, Trinh contends that what seems like displacement is in fact a 'place of identity' because it shows that there is no 'real self' to return to. Instead she finds that there are various 'recognitions of self through difference and unfinished, contingent, arbitrary closures that make possible both politics and identity.' (Trinh, 1992, p 157)

We argue that when understood in these terms fragmentation offers a mobile and contingent way to understand identity formation within CoPs operating in diverse, complex, changeable and sometimes contradictory higher education contexts. It is proposed that when identity in practice is investigated in response to the question 'When, where and how am I?' it can be considered in terms of seemingly disparate and possibly incoherent, but interrelated selves constructed around contested and sometimes contradictory meanings and understandings. These can then be seen to make sense as different facets of identity without being bound to a coherent, summative whole that is able to be used as a meta narrative.

Because metaphor structures thinking by specific association (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, pp 5-6) it also necessarily excludes certain understandings that are beyond the scope of such association. Fragmentation arguably works well as a metaphor for identity formation in CoPs because it allows

the conceptualisation of identity in terms of hybridity and diversity rather than wholeness and homogeneity. Because hybridity and diversity allow for proliferation, fragmentation can be seen as an open metaphor with an inclusive bias. This is apparent in the way that fragmentation makes it possible to think about and experience identity as being constructed from multiple, contingent, lived selves.

It is contended that in university CoPs these selves are usefully understood as narratively constructed. This leads to the second aspect of the proposed approach to researching identity formation in university CoPs – consideration of the relationship between narrative and identity through the concept of narrativity.

*Narrativity: Identity formation as discursive practice and discourse-in-practice*

In this paper narrativity is used to describe the relationship between narrative and identity in CoPs in terms of the narrative construction of identity and inter-subjective experience (McQuillan, 2000, p 8). Guided by the metaphor of fragmentation, this notion of narrativity shapes the new approach to researching identity formation in university CoPs which is proposed in this paper. This combines narrative and discourse analysis research methods. The narrative research approach draws on the work of Holstein and Gubrium on the construction of self in its social and discursive dimensions (2000). Holstein and Gubrium propose a complementary relation between discursive practice (the 'everyday methods members use to articulate social structures') and 'discourse-in-practice', that is, 'the conditions of possibility' for discursive practices as 'they are embedded in historically or institutionally available discourse'. In combination, they contend, these provide a complementary analytics for the 'practice of everyday life' (2000, p 94). Holstein and Gubrium describe this 'interpretive practice' as encompassing the interactional storying of self, the possibilities for subjectivity and the settings and institutions in which selves are shaped. (2000, p 94).

We adopt this multifaceted approach and argue that it usefully opens up investigation of the complexities and diversity of meanings that shape construction of the selves people 'live by'. In this way it can be seen as consistent with the guiding metaphor of fragmentation. In another sense, however, narrative, with its tendency to bind meanings into a coherent whole (Linde, 1993), can be seen as incompatible with fragmentation. One way of resisting narrative's smoothing effect is to carefully and consciously scrutinise perceived narrative realities in terms of narrative practice. Again we find Gubrium and Holstein's work useful. They describe 'narrative reality' as the socially situated practice of storytelling and propose a narrative research approach which extends beyond textual boundaries to include analysis of the various contexts in which stories are 'elicited, assembled and conveyed' (2009, p 2). This analysis includes consideration of narrative occasions (the circumstances in which stories are told) (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009, p 10) and focuses on

narrative work, which Gubrium and Holstein describe as ‘the everyday work that enters into the construction and elaboration of stories’ (2009, p 41). Gubrium and Holstein usefully elaborate the processes that shape this narrative work. These include narrative linkage, which makes experiences meaningful through associations (2009, p 55); and narrative composition, which expands narrative linkages into a ‘story with a content and shape of its own’ (2009, p 69).

The narrative construction of the selves we live by as proposed by Holstein and Gubrium also needs to be considered in terms of broader discourses in order to disrupt a unified reading and understanding of CoPs. The approach to researching identity formation in university CoPs proposed in this paper also draws on Laclau and Mouffe’s theory of discourse, which provides a post-Marxist account of subjectivity within a discursive structure (1985). Laclau and Mouffe explain subjectivity as a ‘subject position’ within a discursive structure that designates subject positions (1985, p 115) . They propose that the subject is ‘overdetermined’, that is, fragmented by multiple positionings in many contingent discourses. (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p 112). In this paper it is argued that fragmentation, when adopted as a metaphor to live by, can lead to insights into the analysis and experience of these multiple, competing and contingent meanings. The proposed approach involves combining narrative research, which encompasses discursive practice and discourse-in-practice, with discourse analysis. Guided by the notion of fragmentation, it is argued that taken together these methods can illuminate a variety of identities constructed through participation in CoPs operating within a mercurial, complex and sometimes challenging broader higher education context. The application of fragmentation to this context will now be considered.

#### *The many ‘wheres’ of the higher education context*

For more than two decades, shifting interrelationships between knowledge, society and higher education have reshaped Australian universities, bringing to university teaching and learning an emphasis on quality, excellence and development (particularly professional development) driven by policy and funding arrangements as well as a desire for higher education to become more engaged with the communities in which institutions are embedded.

Federal government policy has been instrumental in transforming Australian higher education institutions, most significantly since the Dawkins reforms of the late 1980s. In an analysis of the Dawkins reforms, Judith Bessant contends that metaphor played a pivotal role, stating that ‘higher education policy as we know it would not be possible without official rhetoric and the use of metaphor’. (2002, p 88) In proposing a research approach guided by metaphor in this paper we are also mindful of the role that metaphor has played (to adopt a metaphor to describe metaphor) in the articulation of the policy that has re-envisioned and reshaped the higher education context. As

previously noted, we are also cautious about the ways in which metaphor structures thinking and action and limits and exclude meanings.

The contradictory influences and effects of deregulation, reduced public funding, the application of business principles to governance, massification and increasing student diversity have transformed contemporary Australian universities, operating in a global knowledge economy. Marginson and Considine characterise these reforms as a potent demonstration of the 'imaginative reach of neo-liberal policies towards the universities' (2000, p 27). This reach is apparent in current federal Government higher education policy, which focuses on accountability around quality, competitiveness and efficiency in relation to learning and teaching. Current higher education policy, 'Advancing Quality in Higher Education', states the Government's commitment to 'ensuring that the growth in university enrolments is underpinned by a focus on quality'. Federal Government funding of \$1.3 billion is explicitly tied to 'assuring and strengthening the quality of teaching and learning in higher education' (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2011a).

From 2006–2011, the federal Government has funded the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) (formerly the Carrick Institute). The ALTC, like its predecessor organisations, has been significant for university teaching and learning in terms of policy, including the conceptualisation of excellence and quality, and funding. The ALTC states its values as inclusiveness and diversity, collaboration, long-term systemic change and excellence through quality programs and awards and recognition of quality teaching and learning (Australian Learning and Teaching Council, 2010a). ALTC funding and the values which guided its endowment have arguably been instrumental in the growing incidence of CoPs in Australian universities (for example, (Hort, et al., 2008) and (Australian Learning and Teaching Council, 2011)). The ALTC will cease operations at the end of 2011 and from 2012 Learning and Teaching Awards and Grants will be managed by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2011b). The extent to which notions of quality and excellence in Australian policymaking and funding around teaching and learning are variously guided by principles of inclusiveness and diversity, systemic change and collaboration, competitiveness, efficiency, accountability or other values will shape how university learning and teaching evolve, as well as the role, if any, of CoPs in this evolution.

Marginson and Considine use the terminology 'Enterprise University' to describe the contemporary Australian higher education institution in preference to the widely used 'corporate university', contending that their term encompasses academic changes as well as economic, including the diverse and sometimes contradictory impacts of competition and accountability frameworks on research and scholarship (2000, p 235). In this paper we follow Marginson and Considine in their

contention that in contemporary Australian universities new fields of enterprise and innovation coincide with otherwise restricted horizons and the emergence of an institutional template (2000, p 229). One of the characteristics of this template which they identify is the changing role of collegial structures (2000, p 243). Taking online activism as a guide, we propose that the expanded reach of neo-liberalism facilitated by globalised networks of finance and communication coexists with greatly enhanced capacity for social action based on communitarian values (for examples of the latter see (Downey & Fenton, 2003)). Such values, it is argued, are apparent in the growth and spread of Australian university CoPs.

Light and Cox use the metaphor of the storm to describe the condition of contemporary higher education in the UK, which they associate with complex, changing and escalating demands on academics. They contend that the 'academic storm' is the result of shifting relationships between higher education and society, situated in a paradigm shift from traditional 'Mode-1' knowledge production to contemporary 'Mode-2' knowledge production. In traditional Mode-1 knowledge production, university academics defined, produced and disseminated knowledge. Today, Light and Cox argue, Mode-2 society now contracts with higher education institutions to deliver 'knowledge specification' in a globalised knowledge economy context of 'lifelong learning' through a refashioned higher education system driven by a 'discourse of excellence'. (2003, p 9) They contend that as a result 'The academic relationship with knowledge is increasingly dominated by competitive economic structures which any dominant and powerful product ('knowledge is power') engenders'. (Light & Cox, 2003, p 9)

In Australia, a number of commentators have also connected the transformation of higher education in a global knowledge economy with negative impacts on academic identity and culture in local universities. For example, Murray and Dollery associate quality assurance requirements with administrative burdens that reduce teaching quality as well as with increased competition that negatively affects the quality of course offerings (Murray & Dollery, 2005, p 392). Churchman and Stehlik propose that these factors have negatively affected academic work in terms of knowledge development and communication (2007). Murray and Dollery also contend that collegial decision-making has been devalued in the 'post-Dawkins commercialised environment of higher education' (2005, p 388). Cathryn Hammond picks up on a similar theme in relation to sustaining a university community of practice, arguing that community and collective structures 'are under threat in an increasingly individualistic and competitive environment'. (2009, p 2) Nagy and Burch contend that the meaning of being an academic has been redefined in contemporary Australian universities (2009, p 229). Star and McDonald link the expansion of the teaching role with changing academic identities and an imperative for professional development to improve teaching quality and propose that the development of academic identities occurs in a context of competing institutional and individual goals (Star & McDonald, accepted for publication a).

As noted earlier, in Australia, CoP establishment has been associated with strategies to promote teaching and learning excellence, a term with a range of meanings structured by different discourses. Again, fragmentation is a useful metaphor for understanding this contested term in a range of diverse contexts. Light and Cox refer to a discourse of excellence, transposed from industry to higher education, to drive learning and teaching. They associate this discourse with increased accountability derived from two key foci: competition and efficiency and quality and accountability. They distinguish between the call 'for' professionalism which they associate with accountability measures arising from the discourse of excellence and a call 'to' professionalism which they link to the challenge to redefine academic values and practices (Light & Cox, 2003, p 7). Taking up this challenge, Light and Cox propose a model of 'reflective professionalism' which encompasses critical reflection on multiple and diverse discourses and on practice in the wider contexts and critical frameworks of the individual's professional situation (2003, p 12). They state that these multiple discourses are incoherent and that 'Riding the storm is managing this incoherence' by being able to 'critically situate oneself and one's practice within the environment of substantial uncertainty and change – and to manage that change' across roles, knowledges and changing ways of knowing, changing student cohorts and needs, along with departmental and external requirements and professional accreditation demands (Light & Cox, 2003, p 17).

As a working metaphor for understanding and negotiating the contemporary higher education context, 'riding the academic storm' is arguably only broadly useful. This is because it describes turbulent conditions, and their negotiation, in specific, singular terms. A storm, however, is a weather pattern with a range of possible characteristics and effects (positive as well as negative), which will vary according to prevailing local conditions. Fragmentation, therefore, is proposed as a more mobile and useful metaphor for thinking about and negotiating research in the contemporary Australian Enterprise University context because of its construction in terms of hybridity and diversity. This allows for the conceptualisation of multiple and varied effects and for diverse experiences and implementation of the Enterprise University model across the range of differing local contexts in which CoPs operate. As a guiding metaphor, fragmentation also enables diverse understandings of the discourse of teaching excellence within higher education. Australian university CoPs will now be considered in more detail.

### **Communities of practice**

The establishment of CoPs in Australian universities has been significantly informed and influenced by Etienne Wenger's work (see, for example, Hort et al (2008, 1999), Lawrence and Sankey (2008), McDonald and Star (2006) and McDonald and Star (2008)). Across Wenger's evolving accounts, CoPs are described as groups of people who are linked by a passion for a shared

domain of expertise and interact to learn how to develop that expertise (Wenger, 1999, 2004; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002; Wenger & Snyder, 2000; Wenger, Trayner, & de Laat, 2011).

There are diverse views on the appropriateness of Wenger's evolving CoP model to the university context. These range from endorsement (for example, (Viskovic, 2006), (Lees & Gravett, 2006; McDonald & Star, 2006), (McDonald & Star, 2008), (McDonald, et al., 2008), (Hort, et al., 2008), (Koeglreiter, Torlina, & Smith, 2008) and (Klein & Connell, 2008)), through critical engagement (for example, (Churchman & King, 2009), (Churchman, 2006), (Churchman, 2005), (King, 2005) and (Herbert, 2005)) to rejection in favour of an alternative, contextually specific paradigm (Nagy & Burch, 2009) (Star & McDonald, accepted for publication b)).

Star and McDonald find a range of types of CoP are reported in the literature and contend that 'debates about communities of practice are often debates about *types* of communities of practice'. (Star & McDonald, accepted for publication b) They propose a new, 'nurtured' model of CoPs in higher education, arguing that the industry model of CoPs, which arises from Wenger's theorisation, cannot be applied in higher education (Star & McDonald, accepted for publication b). This nurtured form of CoP is proposed as a 'bridge between early CoP theory and current CoP practice' (Star & McDonald, accepted for publication b). Star and McDonald identify three distinct types of CoPs operating in contemporary higher education: 'organic' (or naturally occurring) CoPs, 'nurtured', and 'intentional'. Each is characterised according to how it starts, the group structure, how membership is defined, the CoP's relationship to the institution and its lifecycle. While nurtured and intentional CoPs are both established and cultivated, Star and McDonald distinguish these two types of CoPs on the basis of their respective levels of formality, leadership and relationship to the institution, including the level of formal recognition and direction of the CoP. (Star & McDonald, accepted for publication b). In the approach proposed in this paper, we draw on Star and McDonald's model of CoP types and extend this by applying the guiding metaphor of fragmentation. This is arguably useful for thinking about and researching diverse CoP types because it opens up the possibility of varied, and hybrid, forms of CoP.

There is similar diversity across Wenger's evolving accounts of CoPs in the ways that narrative and identity are connected. In his early work, with Jean Lave, participation in CoPs was central to an account of situated learning in which identity, knowing and social membership were entwined (1991, p 151). Lave and Wenger used narratives extensively to illustrate their theory and cited storytelling as a significant vehicle for conveying cultural understandings of the workplace and members' identities (1991). Wenger subsequently expounded a 'social ecology of identity' (1999) in which the notion of identity in practice emphasised lived experience and attributed meaning to narratives as an experience of participation which must be worked out in practice (1999, p 151). He

rejected the idea that identity in practice could be discursively produced through personal narrative, proposing instead that identity is related to life as lived from day to day (Wenger, 1999, p 151). An account of how broader discourses might structure lived experience was not part of his account. As previously mentioned, discourse in practice is significant in the approach to researching identity formation in university CoPs proposed in this paper, which encompasses consideration of CoP participant and facilitator narratives as well as policy narratives, using a combination of narrative research and discourse analysis methods.

More recently, with Richard McDermott and William Snyder, Wenger has focused on the knowledge management capacity of CoPs in business and industry within a globalised, knowledge economy context and proposed narrative as a useful knowledge sharing and evaluation tool in such communities (Wenger, et al., 2002). A further shift in focus from the organisational to the personal perspective around this notion of value is evident in a recent paper by Wenger, Trayner and de Laat, which defines value creation in terms of the learning that community participation makes possible (Wenger, et al., 2011). Wenger et al propose that value creation in CoPs needs to be investigated 'in the context of narratives', both personal and collective, about 'what counts as value for whom'(2011, p 8). They describe this genre of narratives as 'value-creation stories' and contend that such stories can integrate an account of the value of community participation across the five cycles of value creation that they identify. (Wenger, et al., 2011, pp 19-23)

The approach to researching identity formation in university CoPs which has been proposed in this paper builds on the above theorisations of narrative and identity formation in CoPs by exploring the relationship between identity and narrative in terms of narrativity, guided by the metaphor of fragmentation. This makes it possible to draw on these diverse accounts for insights without adopting any as being conclusive or complete.

### **In conclusion**

Again, aiming for mobile insights within diversity rather than conclusiveness and completeness, this paper has argued the need for a new way of researching identity formation in university CoPs. The proposed approach takes into account the complexities and variety of discourses that influence such identity formation and the changeable and sometimes contradictory Enterprise University contexts in which Australian university CoPs operate. Fragmentation is proposed as a working metaphor, or metaphor to live by, which is useful both in thinking about and researching identity formation in CoPs and in understanding CoPs' various operational contexts and how these relate to the process of identity formation. In this paper fragmentation has been described and applied to the process of researching identity formation in university CoPs and the contemporary higher education context. This paper has also described how fragmentation guides the combined narrative



research and discourse analysis methods used in the new research approach proposed. In summary, it has been argued that fragmentation provides the means for developing practical (or experiential) insights as well as conceptually structuring a useful method for investigating discursive factors, to open up a range of potential new understandings about identity formation in university CoPs.

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