



Becoming an Academic: Processes of Role Transformation

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Abstract

The aim of the paper is to point out the moments that are associated with the beginning of the professional career of the academic staff, but there are different options permeating. It is possible to become an academic in parallel with a formal entry into a given position at the university. But what are actually perceived moments connected with the personal feeling of becoming an academic? Two cases were followed when selecting participants for this qualitative study. The first is academics who seriously considered this profession already during their studies at the university. The second case is academics whose early career at the university was influenced by other motifs and they originally did not consider it. The research method used is an in-depth interview. The specifics of the participants are their joint activities at the faculty preparing future teachers of kindergartens and elementary schools. They are, therefore, in the role of teachers of future teachers. This seems to be one of the factors that creates a strong commitment to deciding whether an academic profession is an adequate choice in this case. The results show the processes that determine the transition from other roles (such as the role of the student) to the role of the university teacher and researcher.

Keywords: *university teacher; professional career; role transformation;*

1. Introduction

The professional career of an academic can take on various forms and may also have different origins. In the Czech Republic, being a university teacher is generally not prestigious. Most young people do not aspire to acquire the knowledge needed for teaching, research and publishing, only minority of them do desire an academic career [1]. An academic enters several roles from the beginning at the university. The significant and specific feature of the academic staff is their action in two basic roles. However, even more roles and transitions between them can be found in the course of professional development, as Fig. 1 also illustrates.

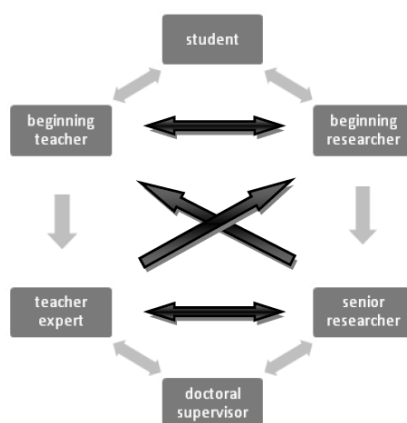


Fig. 1 Circle of professional roles of academic staff

The most significant dual role of teacher – researcher causes problems not only for the beginners. During career development, everyone tends to act more in one of these roles. It is difficult to focus on the development of professional competencies in both roles at the same time. „Lecturers in higher education are usually expected to be good teachers and good researchers, but typically receive little teacher training.“ [2]. Being a good teacher requires different skills and experience reflections than in case of being a researcher. At the same time, however, universities should be constantly involved in

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penetrating both roles by conducting research, which becomes then the base of the transfer of knowledge to students.

The first change of roles which the beginning university teachers undergo, is usually the transition from the role of a student to the role of a teacher. The results of the previous qualitative research by one of authors [3] show that there is a consensus in marking this period as difficult, teetering between the two roles, when beginning university teachers perceived themselves more like students because of age and lifestyle. However, their profession required mastering of the teaching role. Overlapping dual roles were stretching outside the university environment and at the same time their initial concept of what the role of the teacher entails, started to form: specially to set an example for others and to assume new responsibilities.

2. Methodology

The aim of the study is to identify key moments that can affect the beginning of the academic career. These early moments can have a significant impact on the formation and development of profession. Getting to know more about the perception of roles by the beginners can not only contribute to the knowledge in this issue, but it can also help to prevent the typical problems of teaching profession in general. The qualitative research design was chosen in compliance with the research objectives.

2.1 Research Participants

The research participants were all academic staff of a selected university in Czech Republic. It is a university of a regional character but it has been developing rapidly in recent years. A total of 8 academics (six women and two men) from two faculties participated in the research. Two cases were followed when selecting participants for this qualitative study. The first is academics who seriously considered this profession already during their studies at the university. The second case is academics whose early career at the university was influenced by other motifs and they originally did not consider it. The specifics of the participants are their joint activities at the faculty preparing future teachers of kindergartens and elementary schools. They are, therefore, in the role of teachers of future teachers.

2.2 Research Method

The data was obtained through in-depth interviews with participants. All interviews lasted from 45 to 60 minutes. After transcribing interviews in text form, the data were repeatedly open coded and subsequently categorized. The resulting concepts are presented in the next chapter of this study.

3. Results

3.1 Processes of role change

Based on the analysis of data obtained, three possible cases of a process, which is associated with the beginning of professional career at the university, were identified. The basis of this process consists in transition from the student's role in the academic's role. As the participants come from different faculties of the selected university, diverse conditions of the beginning in their professional career are reflected in their statements.

- Gradual transition from the student's role into the academic's role

In this case, the decision to become part of academic community in the position of a university teacher and researcher is based on the process that is continuously linked to the previous student years of the participants.

In fact, I was actually asked, in fact, right during the state exams, the final state examinations, just when they congratulated me, so I was immediately asked by the members of the commission if I could go to doctoral studies, as they really needed a lot of really good people to possibly later create sort of an army of future educators.

Participants have extended the student's role through their previous doctoral studies and they have had enough time to think about their further work at the university. According to [4], the motives of becoming a doctoral student can be divided into two main groups. The former are the external factors as the fulfilment of someone else's ideas, obtaining of financial income for people without experience but also the role model influence. Among internal factors, there is a desire to be a part of the university



environment, and the frequent motif repeated by the participants of the present study is to extend the student role and the benefits it brings.

The decisive thing was probably whether to start with the practice and to stay there for 30 more years, or to continue learning, to try something new, and you can always return to that practice. So it was more of a challenge. Try to see if one can do it.

Even in the case of a gradual transition between the student's role and the period when the student became a full-time academic at the university, the participants felt the difficulty of such a change.

It was really difficult for me. One feels close to those students and one has recently been in that role, role of a student, so one needs to build up respect, to think through each step and think over that new position.

- Breakthrough transition to academic's role

The academics who have taken up the university on the basis of an important change in life, that is changes in the profession, passed through the different process. In some case it concerned a change in a partially coincidental role. Thus, from the teaching profession at the lower level of education they moved to university teaching.

The university also requires practice, but other than teaching, that is a whole range of other duties that no one realizes.

In another case, the change was more vigorous. The participant became an academic after several years in the private sector outside of education system. Comparing such experience has brought both positive and negative statements.

I am grateful that I know a different work environment. It's a good comparison.

Sometimes it's strange to see how someone has been working on just one simple table for so long when you know that in a company it wouldn't be just possible.

It may seem like being at university is such an ease thing, but it is not a job that ends at 2 p.m. On weekends, holidays, night, you still sit on some preparations, projects. So it really was not easy to get used to it.

- Mixed roles

An interesting process with different aspects is attended by the participants who have taken up the role of academic staff (as full-time job), but they became also PhD students at the same time.

We were thrown in at deep end and we did not know what to do, no one told us anything. We entered our office at 1st of September as new doctoral students and they said: Here you have a new timetable and the semester begins 17th of September, this will be your subject to teach.

There is uncertainty about naming the roles. Participants' statements generally refer to the difficulty of explaining their profession to the family and others. But they waver in describing how they perceive their role at the university. Balancing between acting as a student and being a teacher and researcher is very difficult for them.

We are all on the same ship, but not on the same board.

3.2 To Act upon a New Role

Participants described not only their roles and how they perceive the way to be a part of these roles. Their comments also covered the content of a professional role and its possibilities. They perceive difficulties as well as changes in experience and a sense of success.

Practice elsewhere than at school has tangible results, but here many people suffer from not seeing what they have done for many years, instead they should be aware of success.

The perceived possibilities of fulfilling the roles relate to the following categories of participants' statements:



- I am a Teacher

For all participants, the experience of realizing the role of a teacher at the university was entirely new. Even if they previously worked as teachers at lower levels of education, they had to respond to the specificities of the university environment.

Suddenly another experience started with teaching, one already knows what to be careful about in the lesson now, you must be strict in the rules because even the university students can me out for every word I say, it's necessary to use every situation, so one must be helpful as well as scrupulous, so these are two different things to manage.

Now I see myself as still learning. Every lesson, I reflect something that I see and I feel that I did not really realize well that it might be more fine-tuned, some situations where I do not know what do, how to react, or when a student asks something I do not know. So of course I will tell him that I do not know but I also mind this situation.

- I am an Author

While becoming an author in researcher's role also brings difficult situations, a feeling of pride and enthusiasm awakened in all participants.

I was most pleased to have my first abstract at the conference accepted.

- Unpopular burden

Such administrative matters, because I do not have the power to do so. Administration is such a duty that is necessary but I can't imagine to like it.

- Sense of responsibility

Becoming a part of academic staff at university brings responsibility towards students and their preparation, especially for the participants involved in this research who are preparing future teachers. But responsibility also lies that the participants become trainers of students' thesis.

The students see if I have such a professional view, a vision as a supervisor. And I must say it's really hard.

4. Discussion

The presented text is part of a wider research focus of the staff of the Department of School Education at the Faculty of Humanities at Tomas Bata University in Zlín. The issue of a novice researcher belongs to their selected excellent themes. The intention to find out how the beginning academics perceive the transition from former, usually student's role, is thus part of observed aspects of an academic career.

The limits of this study include a small number of research participants coming from one university (though not directly from the same faculty). However, this text also fits in with previous and planned surveys. The professional career with associated roles and their perception by one of participant will become a part of the longitudinal ethnographic exploration.

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