



Essay about finding scholarship

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Abstract

This is a transcript of a podcast, in which I take you through my journey of finding scholarship, and I also discuss some of the challenges of a learning and teaching focused career. Following the transcript, I reflect critically on my podcast through a contextual statement.

Keywords

scholarship, learning, teaching, education, identity, culture, mentor, tribe

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Podcast transcript

Introduction – what is this job I've got myself into?

I have held my first, and only, full time academic position for five years now. This is as good a time as any to reflect on my experience.

Firstly, I never really associated as a 'Researcher'. Before I started as a Lecturer, I was doing my PhD research, so obviously I was engaging in research and considered myself a doctoral researcher, but I did not really think about research projects or a research career beyond my PhD. I did not exactly know what being a 'Lecturer' meant, yet I was looking for Lecturer jobs – it never even occurred to me to apply for research jobs in or out of academia. So 'research' was not directly on the agenda for me.

Then I got my first academic job, and it just so happened to be on a teaching track (or Learning, Teaching and Scholarship, LTS for short), as opposed to research, where my focus was supposed to be on the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL). However, at the time of applying, doing my interview and even when starting the job, I had not even realised that there was a difference, or that there was an option to be only one or the other, or that there were people, not based in educational departments who would do 'educational' research. The only distinction I had ever seen was that there were Lecturers in research-intensive universities and Lecturers in teaching-intensive universities. I did my PhD in the latter, so Lecturers doing research were few and far between in the department. Now I had moved into the 'big league' – suddenly I found myself at a research-intensive university where doing research was an expectation.

At the same time of there being this institutional expectation (as evidenced e.g. by promotion criteria), the departmental expectation was different or at the very least unclear. There were not many (or any) people in my department who had gone through this LTS route (not from start to finish), and so most of us on this track, who were newly appointed, appeared to be 'newbies' to scholarship, and there was nobody to get guidance from. Those who had been on the LTS track longer, seemed to be of the more 'teaching-intensive' lecturer category, with little engagement in research or scholarship. It also was not a very well acknowledged track in the department – we were after all called University Teachers when I first started, and that naturally had the connotation that we were there to teach, not research. We are now simply called Lecturers, just with a LTS focus, so this has created a bit more parity in the roles. Yet I do believe that this has left a legacy, in that we on the LTS track quite often feel that the track is viewed as a second-class career option – the one where those colleagues with insufficient research outputs are 'downgraded' to. Simultaneously I am getting mixed messages of which track I should be on, frequently being asked whether I have thought any more about moving over to research, again as if suggesting that the LTS track is just a placeholder until I manage to increase my outputs. It seems that those managing us have been equally unclear on what scholarship means, as us on the track are. And I say this, only with positivity, as I believe that this has therefore enabled me to take the SoTL journey that I have done for the past five years.

When I started my job, and realised I was not considered a researcher by my institution, I had to realign my way of thinking, and truly consider what my identity would be. Remember, I had not associated as a researcher during my doctoral studies, but at the same time I certainly did not associate as a teacher either. After the cold dunk of 'you are a teacher' start to my job, I suppose my initial goal was to eventually transfer over to the

research track, because it seemed like the more attractive and valued track with more career progression opportunities. Five years down the line, I am loving my job and would never dream of changing tracks. So, what happened? In this essay, I try to explain how and why I changed position and illustrate how I explored this scholarship role and made it my own. I will also discuss some of the issues that make the role challenging and how these might be overcome.

The search begins – navigating scholarship

A few months into my job, my head of department called all of us on the LTS track to a meeting. It was evident that there was an interest to push for work and outputs in the LTS realm, and that we would be supported where possible. We were encouraged to set up a LTS group within the department where we would share LTS knowledge. As a newly appointed staff member I felt the need to prove myself, so I took on the facilitator role for this group. We had some interesting meetings where we mainly got together over lunch to have a chat, or a moan about our teaching and workloads, but we would also sometimes discuss some teaching method or pedagogical tool or similar. One of these meetings resulted in a very fruitful joint scholarship project. A colleague told us about the One Minute Paper teaching tool that came about a long time ago. We had the idea that the tool as it were would probably be quite difficult for us to apply in our very large classes, so could it be digitised? That is essentially the premise of my very first and longest running scholarship project focused on the Digital One Minute Paper (DOMP). Over the years we've presented at national and international conferences eight times, and with two blog posts, two journal articles as well as a major report under our belt, this has been a successful scholarship endeavour.

You might think that surely after nearly five years, this DOMP project would be done. However, I don't think scholarship projects always work that way. Especially if we are researching something that is taking place in our academic practice, it may simply be a very drawn-out process to get to the end of that. For instance, if you are testing something in your teaching, and need a few years of data to evidence an intervention in a course that you might only be teaching once a year, and then you need the time and space to analyse all the data, and finally to write up the research – this may very quickly rack up the years for the project. At the same time, because the process of scholarship projects can sometimes seem so slow and endless, and not always be so self-contained than some traditional research projects may be, I found myself in the position that I got bored of all the waiting, and because academic practice is rife with opportunities for scholarship projects, I ended up working on numerous projects at the same time. I research what learning community means for students in my department and how we can improve their experience in relation to this, and both this and the DOMP project grew arms and legs because of the pivot to online learning. Covid-19 also inspired some more discipline focused research around student experiences and perceptions of the topic of one of my courses, due to its direct links with a crisis such as the pandemic. I also work on an externally facing knowledge exchange project that has teaching and learning heavily weaved into it, in terms of the rationale and expected outcomes. I have also investigated the use of marking rubrics with students doing the first round of evaluation of their work using the marking rubric, before having seen the teacher assessment of their work.

The above projects are just a few examples from the past five years. Unfortunately, I have had to abandon some of my scholarship projects with no published outputs, mainly

because I did not manage to collect enough or the right kind of data or because the data became outdated as I took too long to complete the project. I am extremely keen to complete several of my scholarship projects because I know they have excellent potential to contribute to academic theory and practice, but I struggle to find the time to do this. Additionally, I have several ideas for future projects that I would love to start, but simply cannot, because I need to keep myself in check (see previous point!). For me, scholarship projects are like going into a candy store, and wanting to buy *everything*. An additional challenge has been brought on by simultaneously doing postgraduate study into academic practice, because much of the assessment in the courses has asked me to develop a scholarship project idea or otherwise work on an element of a scholarship project. Naturally, I cannot bypass an opportunity to develop something new if an idea has conveniently materialised. However, where possible, I have tried to converge my postgraduate assignments with my existing scholarship projects, so as not to let my scholarship role get completely out of hand.

The revelation – I am a researcher

Upon reflection, it turns out that I am a researcher after all. All the scholarship projects that I am working on are, by definition, research projects. I do interviews with staff and students. I collect survey and documentary data. I observe class activity. I write case studies about teaching interventions or about discipline research which I turn into teaching cases to be used in my classes. Interestingly, I still don't identify as a researcher. Is this because the word 'research' is not part of my job profile? Or is it because I consider scholarship research to be different kind of research than discipline research, and that discipline research is so strongly ingrained in my mind as 'true' research? Is it because my institution makes a distinction between research and scholarship and this so strongly influences my identity? Scholarship research is hardly ever done with the support of big project funding, unlike discipline research funded by major national or international funding bodies, so in that sense it sometimes does feel like we are just dabbling a bit in this or that research project, that it's not really *that serious*, with real consequences.

However, I suspect that this dilemma about identity around research is not one that I am alone in grappling with. Over the years I have spoken with many colleagues new to the LTS track, and they all sort of know what teaching is, and what research is, but they are all unsure about what scholarship means for their institution, for them and in their role, which is so bizarre since it is a core part of our job and features strongly in the promotion criteria on our career track. It is like we were all thrown into the deep end, without being given an instruction manual – just 'figure it out!' called from the side of the pool.

Within all this uncertainty, I find LTS and SoTL to be a very freeing form of academia. I love being on the LTS career track. I don't think colleagues on a research track realise what they are missing. I have all the freedoms that LTS has to offer – I do research and impact activities of all kinds, yet I have far less of the pressures that come with being on a research track, such as not needing to concern myself with REF. Or should I not say that aloud? Will there now be a mass exodus of people leaving research tracks to join the LTS revolution? Still, I don't feel a need to be chasing the next big funding opportunity for a research project, or the need to put together the best team of international interdisciplinary experts, and I don't have an internal drive to push the boundaries and be on the frontier of research. Don't get me wrong, I still pursue some of this, just on a much smaller scale. In any case, may I liken it (LTS track) to living on the countryside, where things move at a bit of a slower pace and the work-life balance priorities are

different, compared to those (research track) who live in the big city where life is all about the chase for something bigger, better, and faster.

Developing scholarship culture – what have I learned (so far) on my scholarship journey?

Over the years I have learned a thing or two about LTS, and the most pertinent of these is the need for developing a scholarship culture in your department, school or even institution. Next, I'll discuss where and how I think this culture can be driven forward.

The first key point to note in my scholarship journey that set me on this path that I am on, was that I had supportive line management and others in strategic roles who were keen to see LTS flourish in the department. If it wasn't for this support and resource, I very much doubt I would have been able to explore my scholarship role to the extent that I have – I genuinely feel that I was given free rein to make the role my own, with the knowledge that I could at least try to negotiate for financial support or extra time in my workload for scholarship projects.

The second point that I would like to make, that obviously stemmed from the supportive line management, was the forming of a group of LTS staff. This meant that we as a group had a collective, strong voice and identity. Going it alone on the LTS journey is very lonely, and it makes it far harder to fight the battle between traditional research and LTS research, and to justify the types of outputs we produce. The forming of a LTS group of course in my case also led to a very good collaboration that has resulted in multiple outputs. It has made the work lighter, as the load has been shared among a group of people. Equally, this has helped navigate the role, as we have jointly reflected on our experience as LTS staff. This has been an invaluable resource, especially in a job such as academia, where much of the work seems to be a solo effort, or if collaborating, then often doing so with people from other institutions. As a point of interest, the number of staff on the LTS track has more than doubled in my department from single figures to double, since I started, so the cohesiveness of the scholarship group has also been strengthened. I no longer feel like the odd one out in the traditional research environment. My research is valuable. Knowing, and feeling this, is hugely important. We actually stopped meeting as a group of LTS staff during the heyday of our DOMP project (due to lack of time for LTS), and reconvened a few years later, now with this much larger group of staff, and I feel the group plays a clear mentorship role, especially for those new in their posts.

A third point is about the support needs for staff on the LTS track, which still needs resolved for staff to feel equals to their research colleagues. It requires a willingness to commit comparable resources, including sufficient time in the workload and development of new LTS specific roles. For instance, we have staff that lead on research efforts in the department, but if they have limited personal experience of scholarship then I do not believe that they are able to represent the diverse population that is found on the LTS track. We've recently gone through a research and scholarship strategy exercise in my department, yet scholarship had disappeared from the language used, and that diminishes the position of scholarship staff, and pushes us to the outer margins. Scholarship needs to be explicitly recognised, or you risk creating an 'us and them' situation where research and LTS staff are always on opposing teams. Given my comments about having a strong collective voice as LTS staff, we have managed to direct

the issues concerning language and leadership in a more appropriate and inclusive direction, but the outcomes of this remains to be seen in my department.

Conclusion – I found scholarship, now what?

Because academic practice is filled with opportunities for research, you may end up in the position that I did, that you engage in so many projects, that you either struggle to find the time to finish them even with the knowledge that you have excellent data to report on, or you simply give up on some of the projects because a) you didn't manage to collect enough data e.g. because you relied on student data and didn't get enough participants, or b) because the data is so old by the time you manage to set aside enough time to look at it again, that you realise that it is not worth your effort. A mentor from the research track wisely said to me that I need to not just accumulate scholarship projects, but to complete them with valuable outputs. So, I certainly found scholarship. Now I'm faced with the challenge of *completing* scholarship.

Contextual statement

I am not alone in having the feelings and experiences as discussed in my essay. In this contextual statement I provide some background reading on the topic that can direct you to some relevant literature you might want to consult further. The report by McHanwell and Robson (2018) provides an excellent summary and further references to many of the issues discussed in my essay. For instance, the prestige of research vs teaching, and success in research being considered key for job security and progression is discussed, and in fact this is also too simplified a categorisation of the job profile of academics, as so much of our time is spent on administrative and service tasks. We should also not forget the other roles within higher education institutions, such as professional staff or pracademics' (practice-focused academics), who might very well engage in some of the more 'traditional' academic tasks (sometimes called third space professionals). A common approach now in higher education institutions is to separate research and teaching roles. In the UK, university teaching roles appear to be categorised into teaching-only, teaching-intensive, and education-focussed contracts (see Akerman, 2020; Bennett, Roberts, Ananthram, & Broughton, 2018; Hulme, forthcoming; McHanwell & Robson, 2018; Veles, Carter, & Boon, 2019), of which I believe my LTS role fits into the latter. The impact of REF on increases in teaching focused contracts is also discussed by McHanwell and Robson (2018), therefore any feelings of 'downgrading' or 'second class' are not entirely unfounded, and this was also shown in case study examples by Cashmore, Cane and Cane (2013) and empirical research by Bennett et al. (2018). Feeling valued comes from knowing that your institution is committed to your development and career progression; however, not all institutions have clear promotion criteria for teaching and learning, which makes this feeling of being valued much harder to achieve. Overall, there is a lack of senior teaching-focussed staff who can review, mentor, support and be role models to more junior staff on teaching contracts – being teamed up with someone from a research-focussed background is not always straightforward (Bennett et al., 2018; McHanwell & Robson, 2018). The focus of your efforts, e.g. pedagogical research, and the challenges associated with how it is viewed by those reviewing you, become especially evident when you go for promotion – not all promotions panels understand the difference between pedagogical and discipline research. Pedagogical research is not always considered "real" research (Cashmore et al., 2013, p. 28).

In relation to the third space professionals mentioned above, it has been suggested that they are constructing their own credibility as this may otherwise be lacking on an institutional level, or constructing their own unique role profile (Akerman, 2020; Whitchurch, 2008). I would argue that this construction of credibility and role profile can equally apply to those on teaching-focused contracts, especially in circumstances where the institutional role profile is still new or developing, for instance as was the case for me. I came into my institution when this LTS role was relatively new, and most staff were unfamiliar with it and its requirements and job description, and this therefore allowed me to construct some of this in a way that suited my own desires. However, the lack of distinct identity for education-focused academics has been discussed and problematised by Hulme (forthcoming), especially as such staff often compare themselves to the 'more successful' (perceived) research-focused academics. Drawing on social identity theory, Hulme (forthcoming) discussed the role of developing a learning community around educational scholarship, or to effectively form a new tribe of colleagues on LTS equivalent tracks, as we did in my department, although this networking should not necessarily be limited to within our own institution but should also involve communities more broadly. Even substituting 'discipline research' with 'pedagogical research' in promotion criteria is not without its challenges, e.g., as Hulme (forthcoming) indicates the funding to support such research is not comparable to discipline research, and neither are the vast amount of potential outputs of education research (a bit like comparing apples with oranges).

To sum up this 'summary' of literature, a sense of belonging and having role models and mentors in senior education-focused roles are of critical importance for the success of staff on LTS tracks. It is also of key importance to establish your own tribe and using this collective strength to the benefit of education-focused staff in your institution, and this can help influence change in universities (Bennett et al., 2018; Hulme, forthcoming). Reading the blog posts of Greenwood (2020) and Hulme (2020) certainly make me feel less isolated in my education-focused role and the challenges I have experienced and continue to experience, so I encouraged anyone having remotely similar feelings or experiences to mine, to find this network (physical, or virtual) of like-minded people around you to gain strength from it – as much as it sometimes feels like it, you are not alone!

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