Article

"I Try Not to Be a 'Neutral Teacher'": Teacher Identity Formation of Non-Tenured Early-Career Academics in the Humanities

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Abstract: With internationally growing attention to the quality of higher education, a formal teaching qualification has become at many universities a requirement for non-tenured staff to be eligible for tenure. To obtain a qualification, participants in this case study reflect in a portfolio on their teacher identity by describing what they think is important and what guides the choices they make. Based on a thematic analysis of 47 portfolios by aspiring non-tenured early-career humanities scholars in The Netherlands, I will describe the recurring stories about beliefs, values, and commitments toward being a teacher in the humanities. The analysis will provide insight into how teacher identity is determined by the cultural rules of their disciplinary community to which they want to gain access as non-tenured academics.

Keywords: teacher identity; academic community; career development; teacher qualification; disciplinary community; academic discipline

Citation: Crone, Vincent C. A. 2023. "I Try Not to Be a 'Neutral Teacher'": Teacher Identity Formation of Non-Tenured Early-Career Academics in the Humanities. *Humanities* 12: 16. https://doi.org/10.3390/h12010016

Received: 29 October 2022
Revised: 2 December 2022
Accepted: 5 December 2022
Published: 28 January 2023

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1. Introduction

Attention to and appreciation for the quality of education at universities have increased sharply in many parts of the world over the past two decades (Amundsen and Wilson 2012; Amundsen and D'Amico 2019; Hénard and Roseveare 2012; Saroyan and Trigwell 2015; Trigwell et al. 2000). As a result, the career development of academics is no longer determined solely by their research output. High performance in the field of education and demonstrable competencies as a teacher also weigh in the career development of academics (Cashmore et al. 2013, p. 1). For faculty without fixed-term contracts, it is now even a requirement at a growing number of universities to obtain a formal teaching qualification to be eligible for tenure, such as a Post-graduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (PG Cert.) or a university teaching qualification (UTQ) (Butcher and Stoncel 2012; Jong et al. 2013; Hibbert and Semler 2016; van der Sluis 2021; Stewart 2014). To be eligible for such a formal teaching qualification, participants must reflect on their knowledge, skills, and attitude as a teacher within their discipline. These reflections are collected in a portfolio that is assessed by a committee of senior peers from their discipline. Teachers in the humanities are no exception. If they want to be considered for a tenured position, they are increasingly expected to be able to reflect constructively on their role as teachers in their discipline.

In this article, I will present the results of an analysis of these portfolios written in The Netherlands. In the analysis, I looked for the recurring stories in how these non-tenured humanities teachers describe in their portfolio 'how to be', 'how to act', and 'how to understand' their work as a teacher. These form, according to Sachs, the foundation of what their teacher identity is (Sachs 2005, p. 15), and how teachers see themselves has often been described as essential for the quality of education (Beauchamp and Thomas 2009; Beijaard et al. 2000, 2004; Van Lankveld et al. 2017; Steinert et al. 2019; Trede et al. 2012). Subsequently, I will try to understand and explain how the formation of their teacher identity might be facilitated and limited by the disciplinary context in which they teach. With these

considerations in mind, I come to the research question: In what way is the teacher identity of non-tenured humanities teachers formed by the disciplinary community? I will answer this question based on a thematic analysis of 47 portfolios of non-tenured academics in the humanities that were successful in obtaining a formal teaching qualification in The Netherlands. I will look for the recurring stories about beliefs, values, and commitments toward being a teacher in the humanities that can be traced back to the characteristics of the disciplinary community and the precarious status they have as non-tenured academics who want to gain access to that disciplinary community. I will do this by analyzing (1) how they relate to what they teach (disciplinary knowledge) and (2) how they relate to whom they teach (students). The findings from this analysis form the building blocks with which I can provide an answer to the research question in the conclusion. Helpful here is the structure that Sachs' three questions provide in the description of the teacher identity. I will be able to answer Sachs' three questions through the analysis of the recurring stories in the way these teachers describe their relationship to the students and the subject knowledge. Finally, I will discuss the possible consequences of the findings of the analysis and make suggestions for further research.

2. Teacher Identity, Disciplinary Community and Socialization

The research defines teacher identity as what a teacher thinks is important and guides the choices teachers make (Beauchamp and Thomas 2009; Steinert et al. 2019). Research into the formation of teacher identity expanded in the last decade from an almost exclusive focus on primary and secondary education to the development of the teacher identity of university teachers (Van Lankveld et al. 2017; Laiho et al. 2020; Trautwein 2018). These studies into university teachers assume that the university context makes the role of teachers significantly different from other educational institutions because they are, as knowledge-based institutes, organized into different disciplines. These disciplines not only determine how a university separates different organizational units but also form, according to research on the formation of academic identities (Becher 1981, 1987, 1994; Henkel 2000, 2002, 2005), the central context within which academics construct their identities and values: The discipline is the knowledge base of their work, their modes of working, and their self-esteem (Henkel 2000, p. 22). How academics can form an identity following the prevailing norms in the disciplinary community through the recurring stories that are told within a particular community about the community (Giddens 1991; Beijaard et al. 2004; Smith et al. 2000). It is the assumption in this research that the disciplinary context not only forms the academic identity but by extension that there are also stories about how to be a good teacher and what the meaning of humanities education is in the world that in turn will be formative for teacher identity. Learning how to be a teacher and thinking about education is particularly important for non-tenured academics who increasingly have to obtain a formal teaching qualification to be eligible for tenure and therefore access to the community. They are required, as Gerholm puts it, to use a specific type of discourse to successfully enter a community (Gerholm 1990) and become effective members (Weidman et al. 2001). This socialization process involves not only obtaining a sufficient level of knowledge and/or technical proficiency in their intellectual trade but also loyalty to one's academic community and adherence to its norms (Becher and Trowler 2001).

3. Recurring Stories within the Humanities about the Humanities

In this article, I look for the relationship between the recurring stories that are told within the humanities disciplinary community about education and how this contributes to the formation of teacher identity. I have no intention to claim that one-on-one links can be made between the nature of the humanities and the cultural rules of the disciplinary community. This would testify to epistemological essentialism that does not do justice to the versatility of the discipline (Trowler 2014). The question can be asked whether it is plausible that there are recurring stories within a disciplinary community that shape identity. Becher and Trowler do come to that conclusion and can give an outline of some recurring aspects

of how academics within the humanities community distinguish the discipline from other disciplines (Becher and Trowler 2001). For example, there would be a lower consensus within the humanities on criteria for knowledge verification than in the sciences, and there is more room for interpretive research that is not primarily aimed at proving a hypothesis. Frequently using qualitative research methods, the goal of the research seems to be more to understanding than discovering. Furthermore, hearing the voice of the researcher is not considered to be a threat to neutrality or objectivity because, in the humanities, that is not considered as undermining the value of the research. All these characteristics may not be exclusive to the humanities, but they do offer an explanation that it leads to a community in which, as Colavizza's research shows, compared to other disciplinary communities, fewer people are working on the same issues, there is a lower rate of collaboration and low citation recognition compared to other disciplines (Colavizza et al. 2019). This creates a territory, as Becher and Trowler call it, that is considered to be 'rural': organized into many smaller topics of research with a disciplinary community that is described as individualistic, pluralistic, loosely structured, and person-oriented (Becher 1994, p. 154).

4. Materials and Methods

To understand how a discipline facilitates and limits the teacher identity of non-tenured, early-career humanities scholars, I have made a thematic analysis of 47 portfolios written during a teaching qualification course at XXX University in The Netherlands (Braun and Clarke 2006). The course lasts 9 months and consists of a series of workshops and peer meetings. The authors of the portfolios followed this trajectory from September 2017 to May 2018. Only after completion and granting of the teacher qualification were 50 participants approached with the request for permission to use their portfolio for research. Three refused without giving reasons. In these portfolios, non-tenured early-career humanities teachers reflected on their performance as teachers. In my analysis, I look for recurring stories by the participants in their portfolios by analysing how two fundamental relationships are described: (1) how they relate to what they teach (disciplinary knowledge) and (2) how they relate to whom they teach (students). I assume that their reflections on the relationship to knowledge and their students in these portfolios are a representation of a successful teacher identity because it is rewarded, by a committee of senior peers from their discipline, with a qualification.

The following procedure was applied for this analysis. After obtaining the participants' permission, I thoroughly read all portfolios and inventoried all statements. Statements that dealt with technical or didactical proficiencies, such as grading exams on time and being able to use technical tools in education, while meaningful in performing professionalism, were considered less relevant to what a teacher thinks is important and therefore to the formation of teacher identity. These were therefore disregarded. The participants taught mostly in bachelor's programs at XXX University that cover the broad field of humanities, including languages and communication, philosophy, religious studies, history, and media and performance.

5. Findings

5.1. Relation between Teacher and Subject Knowledge

Because knowledge in the humanities is often focused on understanding and relies heavily on the argued interpretation of the researcher and is less often the product of research into a measurable reality that can be discovered, lecturers describe themselves as guides in the process of interpretation. They describe in detail that as a teacher they are not the ones who possess the knowledge, so teaching is not a process to transfer knowledge from those who have it (the teacher) to those who do not (the students). One of the participants defined the learning process in the humanities as follows:

> "Learning is considered a collaborative process in which the teacher assists and guides the learners individually and as a group, in which the students learn from each other, and the teacher even learns from the students."

A teacher is required, writes another participant, to "create a space of affirmative and critical exploration of knowledge" in which the teacher is mainly a supervisor of this process: "I see my role as a facilitator in a process where students feel ownership and express initiative." In the words of another participant: "My general teaching philosophy has always been to think of myself as a coach or a guide, rather than the primary means by which students access the course material." The consensus is strong that this should be the role of a lecturer in the humanities. A participant who, as an inexperienced teacher, seemed to deviate from this during his first lectures, was approached by a senior colleague:

> "[I showed] a tendency to operate too much as an 'expert' and too little as a 'facilitator'. Specifically, a colleague gave the valuable suggestion that you should not strive to be well-prepared for a seminar. After all, this can reinforce the urge to act as an expert."

Enforcement of this unwritten rule comes not only from senior colleagues but students also correct teachers in course evaluations if they fail to take on a facilitating role. A participant thought it was important to first explain the study material, "to ensure the study material was well comprehended by all students". However, in her portfolio, she describes it as an important learning moment when students pointed out that her explanations of the study material gave the impression that "discussion was hardly ever encouraged". The primary goal of the education for these students was not so much the correct understanding of the study material, if at all possible but the exchange of interpretations of it that should be facilitated by the teacher.

This specific facilitating, guiding, and coaching role that is re-articulated in these portfolios also translates into a specific attitude that the teacher should adopt. Because if knowledge is not something that you possess but comes from the exchange of interpretations with the students, the teacher must also radiate that he is only part of the discussion and not someone who has a monopoly on what the correct interpretation should be. As one participant wrote: "I try not to be a 'neutral teacher', but to remain visible as a complete person, and to be very transparent about being someone with preferences and prejudices, who temporarily has the role of teacher." Another participant who had not adopted this desired attitude was told by a senior colleague that his self-confidence and firmness towards students could stand in the way of an 'open attitude' and facilitating role as a teacher; showing his vulnerability to the students would be better. The feedback stated:

> "The danger is that sometimes there is little room for the students to question matters or to put forward their own views. (...) I would encourage XXX to dare to give the class more freedom and to be 'more vulnerable' where possible, in the role of a teacher who offers more coaching than guidance."

The portfolios show that a delicate balance is expected in which the teacher can facilitate a collaborative process of engaging with the study material, does not act as the authority who knows what the correct way of thinking is, is open and vulnerable, but at the same time knowledgeable about the subject. How delicate this balance is is evident in the next passage, where a teacher had emphasized too much that he is not the expert:

> "As a teacher, I think it is important to be open and transparent towards students about this and therefore I made very explicit in the seminars what my background is and which topics I'm less knowledgeable about. In the student evaluations, I read some students did not consider me competent enough for this reason."

From these citations, it becomes clear that a teacher is not supposed to derive authority from their role as teachers or academic status if that gets in the way of the exchange of thoughts with the students. On the other hand, they should not proclaim their lack of knowledge because that makes them seem incompetent.

5.2. Relationship between Teacher and Students

The role of the teacher expected in the humanities classroom also shapes how teachers assess their relationship with the students. Success rates or grade averages do not play any

role in how these humanities teachers describe this: none of the 47 portfolios mentions this. Giving a grade is even described by one of the participants as a 'problematic consequence of my power position in an educational situation'. Because, on the one hand, you are not the superior of the students in the discussion, and because as a facilitator your interpretation of the course materials does not have more value and truth in it than that of the student, but on the other hand, you are expected to assess and grade the student. If it turns out that a student cannot be given a passing grade, these teachers blamed themselves. About a student who had not completed a course: "I have learned that I should try to speak to insecure students even more often or ask for an update on their progress." Another teacher wonders: "The first student I supervised unfortunately handed in a paper that did not meet expectations. This made me unsure about my role as a supervisor. Had I not given this student sufficient support to complete the process?" Even if the students are unprepared, many participants look for ways in which they, as teachers, can facilitate the students' learning process even better: "Students often did not read the material for seminars, so I spent a lot of time structuring the texts and was constantly playing catch-up." The facilitating and coaching role that the teachers give themselves seems to be at odds with a more authoritarian approach in which unprepared students are corrected. After all, as discussed earlier, strictness as a teacher could stand in the way of an 'open attitude' and vulnerability towards students. On finding the balance, one of the participants said:

> "Not all students prepare for every seminar equally thoroughly. (...) Central to my action plan was the devising of guidelines for dealing with such situations before the start of each block. A challenge was not to let this happen at the expense of my approachable attitude."

Descriptions of helpfulness, or even servitude to the students, are often accompanied by elaborate descriptions of how students praised the enthusiasm and engagement of the teacher: "Students call me involved and enthusiastic in their evaluations and indicate that this has a positive effect on their course participation." Some teachers describe how they actively invest in a safe, open, or even empowering space with a "good atmosphere":

> "Throughout the course lectures, I use resources to create a good atmosphere in which students feel safe and stimulated to participate in conversations and discussions. In some lectures, I use other art forms, such as music or poetry, during the start or break."

While striving for a good relationship with students, facilitating their learning and maintaining an approachable attitude, the participants also describe what they see as the higher purpose of teaching in the humanities. In the portfolios, participants frequently refer to the special but threatened position of the humanities in the world. Referring to an ongoing discussion about how the humanities have come under pressure from neoliberal policies that pursue a market-oriented model that functions, directly and indirectly, to serve global business interests. At the expense of learning about our identities as people, societies, and cultures, as well as how to organize our societies to make it a better and more just place (Hyslop-Margison and Leonard 2012; Small 2013; Nussbaum 2016; Bérubé and Ruth 2016). In this, it can be recognized that the higher purpose of humanities education, as described by the participants, goes far beyond the transfer of knowledge: "Teaching is about much more than passing on knowledge; it focuses on creating a safe and challenging learning environment in which students can grow in their role as directors of their own learning process." Because, as another participant writes:

> "[Learning] is ultimately about growing as a person and becoming a responsible member of society. Despite all the legitimate discussions about normative concepts in a globalized and diverse world, I still find the didactic ideal very convincing that education should be about understanding oneself, others, and the world better, about thinking critically and independently, about being respectful and tolerant towards other ways of thinking and living."

In doing so, they advocate the value of humanities education: "Empowering students by fostering their intellectual curiosity and critical and affirmative thinking. I believe that education is a tool of individual and social transformation, where knowledge is not only a kind of proficiency to be learned, but also a tool to be used for personal and collective growth."

6. Conclusions

Based on the analysis of the portfolios, it has been possible to identify recurring stories in the way the participants describe to what they teach (disciplinary knowledge) and how they relate to whom they teach (students). What is telling here is not only that the participants are in great agreement with what teaching in the humanities should entail but also the absence of dissonant voices. There seems to be a required discourse that facilitates, but also limits, what teacher identity is acceptable for the disciplinary community. I will describe this required discourse using Sachs's three questions that determine the formation of a teaching identity: 'how to be', 'how to act', and 'how to understand' their work and their place in society (Sachs 2005, p. 15).

The concept of knowledge within the disciplinary community seems to dictate that a humanities teacher cannot act like the expert or authority in their field but should be a facilitator of a continuous reinterpretation and revision of a body of knowledge. Especially because, unlike disciplines with a higher consensus and/or aimed at solving tangible problems, humanities education is about a continuous discussion about what knowledge is. Not because humanities scholars have not yet found decisive evidence, but because truth claims are not seen as neutral or objective, but as constructs, as powerful determining agents in the making and unmaking of knowledge (Martin 2003, p. 303). A certain interpretation or argument can be considered more valid, within one of the many smaller topics of research, but unlike in the hard sciences, there is no consensus on proof that could lead to a scientific breakthrough. Therefore, teachers should not present themselves as an authority, expert, or be too firm in their self-confidence about a topic, but rather someone who embraces the vulnerability of not knowing and is willing to let education be an open process in which knowledge is not transferred to students but created with students.

The second aspect of teacher identity, 'how to act', also lies in this facilitating, not authoritative role. The portfolios showed that there is a widely held belief that this guiding and coaching role should be accompanied by building a strong personal relationship with the students. As a result, teaching in the humanities is described as a deeply personal act that enforces a certain interaction with the student, recognizable by the great emphasis that the participants place on their approachability, openness (also about their own preferences and prejudices), enthusiasm, and willingness to help. In addition, they experience a personal responsibility for the success of individual students, especially when students failed assignments because of insecurities or personal circumstances.

The last question, how to understand their work and their place in society, is often answered by describing the valuable but vulnerable role that the humanities have in the world. Humanities education helps students to understand the world, think creatively and critically, build reasoning skills, and become responsible members of society, it is argued. In opposition to neo-liberal ideas about economic usefulness that emphasize the need for efficiency and mutual competition in research, the participants see the humanities teacher's role as an agent in empowering, socially transforming, and promoting personal growth in their students.

7. Discussion

Learning and using a specific type of discourse to successfully enter a community is a good way to align your own ideas and convictions as a teacher with the often-unwritten cultural rules of a disciplinary community. As the portfolios have shown, overly large transgressions are corrected within the community so that these novice teachers learn what is expected of them. Insights about this disciplinary specificity of teaching can be useful in

the guidance of starting teachers and developing training programs in which discipline-specific questions and problems can be addressed, such as the delicate balance between being knowledgeable but not an expert who knows the answers. More research, and on a larger scale than this, is needed to gain further insight and especially in the translation of this into ways in which starting teachers can be better guided in their teaching role.

However, for non-tenured academics for whom obtaining a formal teaching qualification is necessary to be eligible for tenure, the disciplinary standards on good education can also lead to what has been described as a kind of self-governance where the distinction between what they really think and how they perform their teacher identity have coincided. It is the downside of a qualification system. The aim is to promote the quality of education, and it produces well-adapted academics, but it may also lead to a homogenization that counteracts diversity and inclusivity in the humanities faculty (Archer 2008; Fitzgerald et al. 2012; Davies and Petersen 2005; Loveday 2018).

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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