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Being chimaera: a monstrous identity for SoTL academics

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Abstract

Lurking on the fringes of university culture are academic identities that do not fit into the usual disciplinary communities. Aiming to explore the experience of 'being academic' when not linked directly to a discipline, this paper examines the stories of a diverse group of SoTL scholars who work in a centralised multi-campus academic skills support centre in an Australian university. Framed as group auto-ethnography, the paper inquires into the everyday experience of these academics through narrative analysis of multiple first-person accounts and makes apparent the monstrousness of de-affiliated academic identities. Despite diverse disciplinary backgrounds, the author-participants found that they now shared a tripartite academic identity formed through the negotiation of three roles: the teacher, the disciplinarian, and the educational researcher. Using the chimaera, a mythical three-headed monster as an organising metaphor, this paper aims to provide agency and visibility for often under-represented and unacknowledged academic identities.

KEYWORDS: academic identity, identity, monstrous, Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, teaching and research, university culture

Introduction

Chimaera who breathed raging fire, a creature fearful, great, swift footed and strong, who had three heads, one of a grim-eyed lion, another of a goat, and another of a snake (Hesiod, 1914)

This paper grew out of a generative conversation amongst a group of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) academics working in an academic support centre, perplexed by their place, role and identity in an Australian university re-positioning itself as an international teaching and research institution. Occupying a strange space in the university, we are employed under standard academic contracts, yet work in a centre that falls under the professional management structure of the university. This means that we are not part of a school or faculty, and thus not formally connected to a discipline, yet our job descriptions involve a division of duties between the traditionally academic 'research, teaching and service'; we are still intrinsically 'academics'. We do not claim solutions through our conversation with each other over our struggle with the changing concept of academic identity, but rather offer our account as part of the call by Winter (2009, p. 125) for the creation of a 'multi-vocal institution'.

Academic identity is enmeshed with academic work not just because it is what academics do but also because the profession is based on a set of values concerning institutional autonomy, academic freedom (Fanghanel, 2012, p. 9) and the intrinsic public 'good' of Higher Education (Churchman & King, 2009). The autonomy and agency that underpins academic work contributes to what Fanghanel (2012, p. 2).

Thus, academic identity is formed through negotiation; it is always changeable, evolving and sensitive to environment (Whitchurch, 2013). In the literature, it has been explored in terms of tensions between managerial and professional work ideologies (Winter, 2009), between management structures and academics (Henkel, 2005; Smith, 2010) and, more extensively, with respect to finding balance between teaching load and research outcomes (Boyer, 1990; Elton, 2001; Greenbank, 2006; Hutchings & Shulman, 1999; Lee & Boud, 2003). Additional research has tracked the emergence of

overlooked academic identities, such as 'para-academics' (Macfarlane, 2011), sessional academics and the division of traditionally synthesised academic duties into teaching-focused and research-focused academic profiles (Locke, 2014). Within many of these discussions lies a presupposition that academic work – whether para, sessional, teaching-focused or research-focused – is intimately connected with a particular discipline (Fanghanel, 2012, pp. 66–68). However, this direct disciplinary connection is being challenged through the emergence of job descriptions within universities that straddle academic and professional domains. These 'blended' (Whitchurch, 2013, p. 9) or 'new' (Locke, 2014, p. 13) professionals include staff, with academic credentials on professional contracts, employed on projects across disciplinary and professional boundaries that involve 'academic' duties, such as teaching and research. Possibilities for new forms of professional identity emerge in-between an increasingly redundant academic/professional dichotomy in what Whitchurch (2008, 2013) refers to as the 'rise of third space professionals' in higher education.

A key characteristic of 'third space' is that it is both safe and risky: safe because in being outside of the usual framework it allows for autonomy, agency and creativity; risky because without a visible framework to work within, resist or negotiate, there is the possibility of isolation, foreclosure, frustration and lack of access to resources and decision-making (Whitchurch, 2013, p. 85). The 'third space' is useful for exploring the fluid and dynamic experience of identities that lack clear markers to conform to or reject, and that may also involve what Whitchurch names 'edginess' (2013, p. 85) and 'paradox' (2013, p. 104). Those that dwell there may feel themselves outsiders, or inordinate, or invisible.

This paper explores the related experience of a somewhat different paradoxical and interdisciplinary identity. In Australia, we are often referred to as Academic Language and Literacy (ALL) educators and our teaching workload is focused on academic skills, literacy and numeracy support, and curriculum development. Our field is focused on SoTL in higher education (Association for Academic Language and Learning, 2010), with the addendum that SoTL covers a wide range of practices and draws on a variety of academic traditions (Percy, 2014). Chanock's (2011a, 2011b) comprehensive literature review of ALL publications in Australia over the past 30 years notes that

Discernible in this literature is a sense of ALL practitioners being on the periphery, believing that neither the students, nor their needs, nor the nature of ALL work, were understood by the institutions within which they worked. (2011a, p. 37)

Furthermore, SoTL is less a clear academic 'discipline' than it is a form of research and scholarly based reflective teaching and learning practice (Harrison et al., 2013) that discipline-based academics are also expected to undertake (Boyer, 1990). To research into SoTL, without also being institutionally tied to a discipline, leads to a complex relationship with how to be academic. Whilst some have labelled this a 'poisoned chalice' (Barkas, 2011), we suggest that the in-between nature of ALL and, thus, SoTL academic work, situated as it is outside of the dominant institutional paradigm, leads to an unusual and, as yet, un-named academic identity.

In exploring our sense of contested identity, we were drawn to the metaphor of the Chimaera, a primeval Greek monster, part lion, part goat and part serpent (Hesiod, 1914). We were also drawn to a second meaning of the term 'Chimaera' – that of something illusory and unreal: 'a mere wild fancy; an unfounded conception' (OED). The three species of the Chimaera speak to our tripartite identities, and manifest in the demand to be a generalist teacher of academic literacies, a disciplinary researcher (and possibly disciplinary teacher) and a SoTL researcher (based on the methodological frameworks that are familiar to educational research). For us, as strange and apparently monstrous academics, identity is not only formed through balancing teaching and research activities, but also through the struggle of negotiating access to the liminal space that being a lion, a goat and a serpent opens up. It is also formed within invisibility, within mereness. Here, then, is our story.

Methodology

This is a group auto-ethnography, in which the seven author-participants – who work in a centralised academic support centre in an Australian university and who are from the disciplines of philosophy, anthropology, cultural studies, environmental science, education and tourism – give voice to both individual and shared experiences and embrace the strange aspects of professional/academic

identities. We aim to provide agency and visibility for an often under-represented, un-noticed or misunderstood experience of being academic. We do this through an organising metaphor of the three-headed Chimaera and the theoretical concept of monstrosity.

In designing the methodology, we were conscious of the need for multi-vocality and multiple authorship. The weaving of different voices was central to the project and ultimately our argument, and therefore we chose a method that focused on personal narratives but allowed those narratives to be increasingly formed in relationship with others. For this purpose, we used a 'Story Pot', where participants wrote a first-person narrative about their history and sense of identity within the academic support centre. Reading the others' stories stimulated new ideas and further narratives, and all participants wrote two or more iterations. At the end of this process, we had 20 pieces of narrative for analysis, which represented an iterative group conversation written entirely in 'I statements'. Thus, the Story Pot perhaps best resembled feminist collective discussions, for example, The Women Writing Women Collective (2008), or the Quaker-inspired circle process from Palmer (2004). We viewed it as a 'group auto-ethnography' (Nunez & Murakami-Ramalho, 2011), with the capacity for sensitivity to complexity and multi-vocality (Mizzi, 2010). Originally a methodology from cultural anthropology, ethnography is also a valuable tool in educational research (Robinson, 2011; Scutt & Hobson, 2013).

Once the Story Pot process was complete, we explored the ways in which the various academic identities were revealed. The interpretive framework of analysis focused on broad cultural and institutional structures (Bold, 2012) in the context of the SoTL academics' individual narratives. Particular focus was placed on whether, and if so how, the multi-vocal narrations co-constructed a sense of shared SoTL academic experience (Polkinghorne, 1988; Riessman, 1993). This approach provided scope for assessing affordances and constraints of the multi-headed identity, in terms of shared experience, individual agency and broader institutional structures.

We who are monstrous

We turned to 'monstrous theory' (Cohen, 1996) because it resides in the fluid third-spaces (Bhabha, 1994; Whitchurch, 2008, 2013) that relate to those who do not easily fit into an ordered system (Douglas, 1970) – those who live on the margins or the 'fault lines' (Locke, 2012, p. 268). To be monstrous is to transgress the boundaries of normality and to fuse multiple perspectives (Kristeva, 1982); to experience the indeterminate space between imagination and actuality (Winnicott, 1971); and even to become alien to the self (Gilmore, 2003, p. 189). Indeterminacy is not enough to form the monstrous identity; it is created by mixing across barriers, such as occurs in trans-species fertilisation. The concept of monstrosity dances on the borders between binary oppositions, resists rigid categorisation and challenges dominant paradigms (Cohen, 1996). In our experience as SoTL academics, we became monstrous because we were not tied to the disciplinary space, because we were 'other' to the professional roles often assigned to ALL educators; and because we were multi-disciplinary, multi-faceted and multi-vocal. Monsters appear at times of crisis as a kind of third term that problematises the clash of extremes; they are what Cohen refers to as 'disturbing hybrids' that do not easily fit into any one category of being (1996, p. 6). Thus, monstrous identity 'dwell[s] at the gates of difference' (Cohen, p. 7). These are also the gates that granted access to a student body filled with difference and diversity that universities seem to both fear and desire (Devlin & Samarawickrema, 2010).

As student numbers have grown, so has the proportion of academically underprepared students who need further scaffolding in their approaches to learning (Haggis, 2003). Much of this work is displaced into academic support centres and academics are employed to work directly in the field of SoTL to cater to these expanding cohorts. SoTL is not (yet) a discipline in its own right, and thus full time academic work in this area, like other monstrosities, 'policing the borders of the possible' (Cohen, 1996, p. 12), 'stands at the threshold ... of becoming' (Cohen, 1996, p. 20) and provides scope for new, transformational and unusual ways of being (Haraway, 1992). Chimaera – in her multi-headedness, her hybridity and her disturbing visibility/invisibility – is a powerful image of such monstrosities.

Being Chimaera

In our analysis, the three heads of the Chimaera – the lion, the goat and the serpent – embody our three co-existing and yet distinct responsibilities – the teacher, the disciplinary scholar and the educational researcher. These three ‘heads’ are differentiated by their different demands, time allowances and constraints. The teacher head refers to the identity that surrounds the cross-disciplinary teaching responsibilities of the SoTL academic. The disciplinary researcher head speaks of the academics’ relationship with their original disciplines, while the educational researcher head focuses on how the teaching academic connects with educational research. Analysis of our data pertaining to each head found that recurring themes of insecurity, ambiguity and invisibility emerged. The sense that as SoTL academics we are potentially monstrous, in some sense unwelcome or disturbing within the wider university, was also consistently articulated. It also became apparent that to the rest of the university, SoTL work is often viewed as illusory and fanciful: merely a Chimaera.

The lion head – the teacher

The identity of ‘teacher’ was by far the strongest and largest, in terms of references to this aspect of SoTL identity in the data pool. This is unsurprising, given that a major part of the participants’ workload was allocated to teaching and the acute focus on teaching and learning in the centre. While there were many references to the familiar academic dilemma of trying to find a balance between teaching and research duties, it appeared that teaching in the academic support centre further evoked a monstrous experience in terms of invisibility, misrepresentation and valuelessness.

Feeling invisible and misunderstood in the broader university was articulated in various ways. One account read *I am an invisible teacher, because I teach those students that the University wishes were not here ... I am supposed to teach them the stuff that my colleagues in the schools cannot be bothered to teach. They teach the important stuff, I by default do not.* Feelings of invisibility were exacerbated by the perception that teaching academic skills was considered ‘second-rate’, compared to disciplinary courses: *Many people in the uni assume that this work is remedial, and make the further assumption that remedial teaching is simple and low-level.* A clear theme that emerged from the

multiple narrations was that the SoTL teacher role was unseen and/or undervalued in the broader university culture.

Another frustration that emerged in the teacher-narratives regarded the students the centre catered to. Narrators saw these students as being perceived by outsiders as *non-traditional, low SES, remedial, battlers, nerds, struggling, at risk, high school*, and even *invisible*. From this it appeared that much of the teaching was focused on students who did not easily fit into an ideal or ‘normal’ university student mould. Catering to students on the fringes of the mainstream university culture led to unusual teaching responsibilities being articulated, such as *surrogate mothering, miracle working* and *mending a broken system*.

Adding another layer of monstrosity was a paradox in the teacher stories that suggested, while usually overlooked, academic skills and literacy teaching became hyper-visible, once ‘at risk’ students were identified:

I have a postgrad student who can't write a coherent sentence – I'll send him/her to you and you can fix that, huh? Or: I have an overseas student with very poor English writing skills – perhaps you can meet with them for a couple of sessions and fix that up? Pass them on to your ESL expert.

Teachers in the centre also became hyper-visible to students they assisted, especially when they helped students to improve their grades, demystified academic expectations or provided extra care and nurture.

Further ambiguity was experienced regarding new and unusual teaching tasks undertaken in the centre. One academic with a science background recounted being tasked with a humanities course: *I had suddenly landed on Mars and was presented with a worldview completely alien to my own*.

Another wrote of negotiating *multiple hats*, while another suggested that their *role has morphed up to five times in as many years*.

In another more positive paradox, however, the teacher-narratives also emphasised the participants’ love for teaching and ways that the multi-disciplinary learning centre context offered rewarding

teaching experiences. One found that she benefited from an *elastic and self-determining* role in the centre. Other accounts echoed this sentiment, stating, *while I do teach more 'at risk students' ... I have found the teaching experience itself is far more rewarding [than in a school] and: Spilling across the disciplines, I get some interesting insights not available to those safely inside one. I love this!* In this sense the head of the lion reflected our powerful self-identification as teachers and our determination to maintain our 'courage to teach' (Palmer, 2007).

The goat head – the disciplinarian

The goat head, as the disciplinary scholar, emerged from the data as a secret, hidden aspect of the SoTL identities. The stories overwhelmingly suggested that the participants were unsure as to the role their disciplinary scholarship was supposed to play within the academic support centre. Many kept disciplinary research activities 'secret', or at least played them down, for the fear that they were deviating from a job they felt was primarily focused on educational development and pedagogy. Yet they were stubborn in their adherence to this identity. Some narratives recounted working on disciplinary research at night and on holidays; others of deliberately switching to part-time work so they could do disciplinary research on their unpaid days. Another member continued to take on consultancies in her discipline (again, working on weekends). Further accounts spoke of *secret supervision* of research students within an original discipline, or other 'secret' teaching, and of writing disciplinary books largely outside of paid hours. Insecurity was expressed over the kinds of research work that 'counted' in the centre, with a primary concern being that long-held disciplinary interests and passions may have to be left behind.

A feeling of *disciplinary stagnation* and dislocation was also articulated. The varied stories contained statements such as *I frequently pine for my school and research interests that are based on conceptual – rather than practical or empirical – approaches*; that it had been *too long since I have worked in my discipline*; a *loss of status* in her discipline and a feeling of being a *fraudulent academic*; or not a *real disciplinarian*. The narratives pointed to disciplinary dislocation, invisibility and insecurity, not only in the academic support centre and the broader university culture, but also within the individual.

Maintaining an identity as a disciplinary scholar took the tenacious and canny skills of a mountain goat: nimble, and sure-footed, leaping from point to point, yet always with the abyss below.

The serpent head – the educational researcher

The identity of the educational researcher, or the serpent head, was by far the smallest of the three. As only one of the participating academics had a disciplinary background in education – and even then, she completed a PhD in tourism – the educational researcher as a primary identity marker represented an absence, rather than a presence. References to this role were limited, yet significant. In many ways, the educational researcher identity seemed to cause the greatest level of ambivalence, in part due to the disjuncture of being perceived as an educational researcher, without training in the ontology and methodology of education. One participant stated that *Educational research mentors are invisible in the Centre*, while another suggested that *now I find myself eager to research, but not sure where to begin*. There was also some resistance to researching in education, with one commenting that *I don't want to do educational research. It does not excite me. I might just as well watch paint dry*.

Part of the difficulty in visualising the educational scholar was articulated in suggestions that educational research, like academic skills and literacy focused teaching, was viewed as low status, and SoTL was seen as 'mainly practical' rather than theoretical. As one account mentioned, *we remain invisible to the university. We are the 'skills people up there who can help with essays'*. The importance of discovering and/or enhancing an educational researcher identity was expressed in the following dilemma: *how we can be a teaching and learning centre if we don't keep expanding our strengths through educational research? But at the same time our nourishment comes from our core disciplines*. The majority of the stories supported adopting an educational research perspective – in addition to, or as a replacement of, disciplinary interests. However, there was a lack of coherence and clarity articulated regarding how the educational researcher head could align with the other responsibilities, or heads, of the SoTL academic. The outline of educational research seemed to lie on the ground like a cast-off snake skin, empty and lifeless, and the ambiguity was poisonous.

Paradoxes: horror and hope

As Chimaeras, the SoTL academics did not present the heads as simple, mutually exclusive identity markers; rather, identity was formed through clashes and negotiations between the heads. There were multiple references to the effort to negotiate three dominant roles – the teacher, the disciplinarian and the educational researcher – in relation to one another and the broader university culture. A number of strategies, some more successful than others, were brought to this task.

Managing teaching–research tension is an identity struggle that is pervasive for disciplinary and de-affiliated academics alike (Fanghanel, 2012); what appeared unusual and often horrific in these narratives was the additional tension of trying to negotiate two distinct research identities with a broad range of ever-changing multi-disciplinary teaching tasks, whilst feeling invisible within the university. Much of the distress expressed was related to questions of visibility and recognition; of being, perhaps, in a ‘zone of unthought, a space where struggles around identity never cease’ (Uebel, 1996, p. 282). The experience was one of marginalised identity, of being *fringe dwellers*, in an *academic wasteland*, in *academic limbo*, in an *academic ghetto* and of paradoxically feeling *trapped* and yet *adrift* in the university. In part this struggle around identity might be due to SoTL's relative newness as a field, with limited aspirational models of a professional career path to either work towards or resist against, unlike the disciplines which have ‘well-defined, strong and relatively stable canonical renditions’ (Fanghanel, 2012, p. 72). From this perspective, the work of negotiating academic identity at each moment of activity (Clegg, 2008; Fanghanel, 2012) was too fluid. At the micro level of academic practices, Fanghanel (2012, p. 73) suggests that there is a possibility of creativity ‘like sand on the beach, or mud – soft, malleable and moving’. However, this playful realm of sand castle building, these fluid spaces where transition between and negotiation with identities occurs, can become a trap when no clear structure emerges to work towards, dismantle or adapt. Lacking a clear disciplinary framework – and thus a clear picture of how to approach research into the multi-disciplinary and multi-methodological field of SoTL, often only with single-disciplinary research expertise – meant that the academics found it difficult to structure long-term research plans and to consolidate a consistent research profile in the centre.

Whilst simply knitting together the two research heads might seem a good strategy for addressing clashes between disciplinary interests and SoTL, it was not particularly easy, especially where *there are profound differences in writing style and genre across this disciplinary divide*. The tension between developing two different areas of expertise was expressed by one participant: *it is as if I am doing two PhDs, one in my discipline and one in education*. Another named it an *uneasy* task, and a third, *a messy compromise*. Our narratives made explicit that the research heads created a cognitive dissonance difficult to reconcile, and that this impacted particularly on willingness to seek publication, with concerns that *what I do is not high quality research*, or will not go to *the right journal*. Yet paradoxically this multiplicity also led to hope.

The cross-disciplinary multiple-expertise aspects of our work presented opportunities for rewarding, stimulating and liberating academic experiences that might not be available to discipline academics. Indicating a growing confidence with the ambiguity and ‘duality of belonging to academic space’ (Whitchurch, 2013, p. 11), there were numerous accounts of strategies to move beyond the Chimaera identity as a trilemma and embrace its multiplicity. One account spoke of building an identity as a creative writer, and the importance that this held in relation to her identity as a teacher of research writing. Another enrolled in a Clinical Pastoral Education course, which she hopes may offer *new insights and approaches* for teaching and learning scholarship. Another was taking a course that *combines my passion for research and for education*. These strategies often involved further interests, leading to multiplying of ‘heads’. There was also celebration of the methodological insights that become possible from cross-disciplinary teaching and reference to an attempt to *infuse my [skills-focused] teaching* with themes from her original discipline. *Strategic publishing* was also identified: one account spoke of merging all the heads by publishing as both a member of an original discipline and as a teacher in a research journal interested in alternative educational research methodologies. Here we see new expert identities emerging, beyond a simple combination of the three monster heads. The *secret supervision* and subterranean, non-sanctioned writing so common for the goat head of the disciplinary scholar may also be seen as a personal strategy for finding some identity balance. Ironically, it is as if these accounts were approaching in unease what Rolfe (2013) proposes in

enthusiasm – a rhizomatic, invisible, 'metauniversity', below the radar of managed academe, formed of strategic and quiet alliances. And indeed in our accounts there were moves to form alliances, if more overt and celebratory, both within and without the centre. One spoke of working with disciplinary academics: *adding to their research by informing their work with my scholarly voice on teaching and learning*. Additional hopeful references were made to positive connections with other SoTL academics, outside the centre, interested in *teaching as an issue of research* and finding conceptual links across disciplines. One addressed issues of visibility directly: creating disciplinary profiles on the centre website to validate individuals' disciplinary experience and to make the multi-disciplinary nature of the centre visible to students and other academics.

An overwhelmingly positive strategy for reconciling the Chimaera's challenges was in the opportunity for the SoTL academics to become visible to one another in a recently formed Journal Article Group, initiated by one of our members. Fondly known as JAG, and focusing on peer support and the writing process, this group had been meeting weekly for a semester and was a place where participants felt able to articulate all three heads and/or their anxieties about growing or losing these heads. *This was a place where I could grow an important part of my academic self, which up until this point lay dormant*. Also, the JAG is *a place where I can voice my epistemological howling*; and, as a third account states, *it emboldened me to devote some work time to writing*. JAG members told of beginning to articulate the issues and help each other with solutions, including beginning research into teaching and offers of co-authorship. This is in line with research that supports the benefits of collaborative writing groups built on a peer-learning framework (Lea & Stierer, 2011; Lee & Boud, 2003) and the value of co-mentoring strategies (McGuire & Reger, 2003). Through conversations expressing insecurities and revelations about secret disciplinary activities and passions, this diverse group of SoTL academics and authors found empowerment and validation through discovering a shared sense of their monstrous identities. The JAG was attributed with a reclaiming of *the importance of the sustenance/nourishment of being an academic scholar, a disciplinary scholar* within the field of SoTL. Hopeful accounts saw the disciplinary scholar as essential to *authenticity and currency* in the broader academic community and claimed that *it's not possible to*

teach research and academic skills, if not doing it yourself. These lines of reasoning evident in the Story Pot entries framed both multi-disciplinarity and discipline-specific activity as *core SoTL business*. Possibly the most significant aspect of the JAG, however, was that the members' identity struggles became visible to one another, and in doing so, empowered them.

Conclusion

Naming and claiming the Chimaera identity-metaphor for this diverse group of SoTL academics has been, perhaps, the most useful in the co-creation of a shared sense of academic validity and possibility. Whitchurch's (2008,) naming of the 'third space' has undoubtedly claimed space and legitimacy for those working there on professional contracts, as did Boyer's (1990) assertion of space for SoTL. With many of us feeling misunderstood, isolated and alone in our experience of de-affiliated scholarship and teaching in the academic support centre, we turned to conversation to gain agency (Archer, 2000). The JAG writing group, and the subsequent process of researching and writing this article, has demonstrated that we are, in fact, part of a much larger academic monster, one that has the potential to offer insights and perspectives that disciplinary paradigms may not find from within. The writing of this paper became part of the academic project of exploring this: 'writing itself is a way of thinking and theorising and not simply an expression of what one already knows' (Clegg, 2012, p. 416). The sharing of strategies that attempt to integrate, transcend or simply celebrate our monstrous selves continues here and elsewhere.

In the spirit of our own cross-disciplinary hybridity, we offer here one more facet of the Chimaera metaphor. In genetics, *chimerism* describes an organism containing different DNA, with a mix of genetically different tissues, but in genetics we know that most women – due to a process known as *lyonisation* or X-chromosome inactivation – are in fact genetic chimaeras already (Cooper, 2011). Perhaps, then, we academic monsters are also secretly more common than we think? The growing focus on identity struggles in academe, as well as Boyer's (1990, p. 57) call for a 'mosaic of talent' in the multiple scholarships of *discovery, integration, application* and *teaching* (particularly if we allow

such a mosaic within a single academic, as he does), suggest this could be – or perhaps should be – so. It also suggests that institutions that find ways to support such chimaeras, perhaps through community building exercises like the JAG, a willingness to hear these secret stories, and a readiness to reward cross-disciplinary and hybrid research and teaching, will better access this larger pool of talent.

By visualising and giving voice to a particular ‘blend’ of academic experiences, we have made visible (at least to ourselves and each other) the monster. In doing so we have found hope for academic staff who slip between the usual disciplinary paradigms and inhabit a space where ‘the monster stands at the threshold of becoming’ (Cohen, 1996, p. 20). The hope that resides with the process of academic identity formation in unusual, and often overlooked, third spaces is that those who float in between, around and across disciplinary and professional borders are expanding the ‘academic’ paradigm and challenging and re-making what it is to be ‘normal’ university staff (Jawitz, 2009). This paper extends an invitation to other academic monsters to step out of the shadows to demonstrate the unique and unusual ways in which they are being ‘academic’.

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