

Betwixt and Between: Academic Women in Transition

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ABSTRACT

University culture is increasingly being influenced by globalization, competition, the commercialization of research, and external demands for accountability. Corporate managerial practices that value individualism and productivity bump up against more democratic and collaborative practices inherent in the traditional academic culture and governance. Tensions result as faculty members are left on their own to make sense of the shifting political, economic and social landscape of higher education and to understand the implications for their professional identity within their Faculty. In an unstable institutional culture that lacks rules or mechanisms to shepherd faculty through this process, individuals can feel anxious, confused or incompetent as they negotiate the contradictions in their professional lives and deal with issues of power and resistance.

Grounded in their own experiences of liminality, this paper uses an autoethnographic approach to explore and describe the experiences of three academic women “betwixt and between” their senior management positions, taking up positions as academic members of a Faculty, and the strategies they used to support each other, to reconstruct their professional identities and to understand the norms of the Faculty culture. The paper speaks to the importance of post-heroic forms of leadership, dialogue and collaborative communities that contribute to the creation of a culture in which faculty members can flourish.

RÉSUMÉ

La culture universitaire est de plus en plus influencée par la mondialisation, la compétition, la commercialisation de la recherche et les pressions externes pour une imputabilité accrue. Les pratiques managériales corporatives qui mettent l'emphase sur l'individualité et la productivité entrent en collision avec les valeurs plus démocratiques et avec les pratiques collaboratives inhérentes à la culture et à la gouvernance universitaires traditionnelles. Les membres du corps professoral sont ainsi soumis à des tensions, laissés à eux-mêmes face à ces changements dans le paysage politique, économique et social de l'enseignement supérieur et aux impacts de ces changements sur leur identité professionnelle. Situés dans une culture institutionnelle instable qui offre peu d'encadrement aux professeures et professeurs, ces derniers peuvent se sentir anxieux, confus ou incompétents dans leurs tentatives de résolution des contradictions de leur vie professionnelle, aux prises avec des enjeux d'autorité et de résistance.

Sur la base de l'expérience liminaire de trois femmes universitaires et d'une approche autoethnographique, cet article explore et décrit cette expérience à « l'envers et l'endroit » de leur poste administratif, de leur prise de position comme membres du corps professoral et des stratégies qu'elles déploient pour se supporter l'une l'autre, reconstruire leur identité professionnelle et comprendre les normes de la culture professorale. Cet article souligne l'importance des formes post-héroïques de leadership, du dialogue et des communautés de collaboration qui contribuent à la création d'une culture au sein de laquelle les professeures et professeurs peuvent grandir.

This preliminary, interpretive study was motivated by our commitment to understand the creation of a sense of community in university settings. As three women in the graduate division of a faculty of education, all with diverse but related academic backgrounds, we describe and interpret our experiences of entering and reentering the academic culture.

As we came together from our respective and parallel needs to connect and feel a sense of belonging to our new academic community, we realized the potential for co-creating knowledge through engaging in dialogue. Therefore, our research focus evolved *out of* relationship formation. Our objective was to explore and to describe our experiences as we attempted to navigate the academic landscape, and to document some of the factors that promote collaborative university communities. The authorship of this paper is sequenced alphabetically to convey the collaborative process that was central to this study.

The Current Context of Higher Education

The institutional higher education contexts that are the organizational homes for faculties of education and programs of teacher preparation are currently experiencing significant change. From the “globalization” (Currie & Newson, 1998) or business orientation of many of their practices and ideology, to their focus on an individual, entrepreneurial and quantitative approach to the professions (Aronowitz, 1994; Cole, 1999; Currie, 1998; Davies, 1999; Giroux, 1999; Manicas, 1998; Welch, 1998), institutions are being challenged to adhere to new expectations. These changes have required that faculty members, new and old, shift many of their roles, accountabilities, approaches to teaching and learning (Aronowitz, 1994; Nelson, 1999), and that they adopt a corporate culture where knowledge transfer is viewed as enterprise (Barnett, 2003; Blackmore, 2002; Jarvis, 2001; Marginson & Considine, 2000). Often described as corporate machines, university cultures focus heavily on tasks, structure, procedures and outcomes, driven by customer/consumer demands.

In Canadian post-secondary institutions, dramatic decreases in government funding have resulted in increased tuition fees and a need to partner with donors and the private sector (Dwyer, 1997; Mount & Belanger, 2001) and to move towards managerialism, elitism, and privatization (Currie, 1998; Fisher & Rubenson, 1998; Mount & Belanger, 2001). “It is argued that these business values have also led to insularity among academics, greater closed individualism, a lessened sense or loss of community – in short, the precedence of dehumanizing aspects of global markets over community and human priorities” (Mount & Belanger, 2001, p.139). The resulting commercialization of research and the increasing competition for scarce research dollars has accentuated emphasis universities have placed on individual performance.

All of these factors can contribute to faculty members feeling relegated to the margins, as cogs in the machine of course design and delivery, and as profit generators. Measured by tasks and outcomes, faculty members invest less and less time and attention on critical human processes, such as the induction and mentoring of new faculty and graduate students, or giving service to the faculty or university communities.

Teacher education in Canada, as in Britain and Australia, has become increasingly career-focused and professionalized with new entrants to the profession coming from research-oriented colleges and universities (Maguire & Weiner, 1994). The teaching profession is also becoming more “feminized” and aligned with caretaking (Acker, 1997, Acker & Dillabough, 2007; Maguire & Weiner, 1994;). Harley (2003) maintained that, for women in faculties of education, there appears to be increasing conflict between what is being valued (managerialism) and what is expected (collegiality). Furthermore, this conflict disproportionately affects women since “they tend to value connectedness and emotional sensitivity [versus] sustaining competitive, individual advantage” (Harley, 2003, p.388).

In light of this evolution of faculty culture, there has been a renewed interest in what counts as valued work of faculty members and the importance of respect for their work (Acker & Dillabough, 2007; Cole, 1999; Gappa et al., 2007). There has also been some interesting new research on the interaction between external changes in higher education and individual faculty members' responses to their own work lives and identities (Bettis, Mills, Williams & Nolan, 2005; Bettis & Mills, 2006; Mills & Bettis, 2006). The concept of *liminality*, a sociological lens through which individual faculty members make sense of their changing work lives and identities (Turner, 1967, 1977; Turnbull, 1990), was originally used to describe the "betwixt and between" state of adolescents transitioning between childhood and adulthood. Turner (1967) referred to this stage as "that which is neither this nor that, but both" (p.99); this concept has now been extended to other "betwixt and between" conditions in societies and in organizations. Bettis et al. (2005), Bettis and Mills (2006) and Mills and Bettis (2006) used the construct of "liminality" as both a theoretical framework and as an explanation for making sense of the interactions between the changing contexts of higher education environments and faculty members' responses to these changes. In their study of the reorganization of a college of education, Bettis et al. (2005) described the ways that faculty members demonstrated their responses to the condition of being "betwixt and between." They found that "due to the liminal status, the anxiety engendered by that status, and the faculty's inability and resistance to collaboration, "we" began to withdraw from the department and to fall back on previously formed aspects of our professional lives" (Bettis et al., 2005, p.53).

Also, since demographic projections anticipate major changes in faculty members, with over half of all Canadian faculty members being eligible to retire within the next 15 years (Foot, 1998), postsecondary institutions are currently challenged to hire and acculturate many new faculty members with diverse backgrounds and experiences. The intensification of work and the diminishing autonomy of the university may result in more senior administrators (i.e., Deans, Vice Presidents, and Presidents) stepping down and deciding to return to their academic work rather than continue to pursue a career in administration. At the same time the traditional career track of academics is changing with the advent of more limited term contracts and non-tenured faculty being hired. It is increasingly important to understand the experiences of transition of new and returning senior faculty, and to use this information to inform and support them.

Previous research (Astin & Davis, 1993; Ropers-Huilman, 2000) highlighted the importance of collegial relationships and the connections with others who shared similar experiences, as central factors impacting the satisfaction and professional advancement of women academics. Consequently, the lived experience of the collegial relationships of women academics is of increasing importance as an indicator of job satisfaction. There are relatively few studies, however, to inform and support women, new or returning to academia, in their

transition to the higher education context in general and to faculties of education in particular (Acker & Dillabough, 2007; Reay, 2000). It was within this reality, and grounded in our own experiences of liminality, that we explored our own experiences of transition, sometimes as ones who live at the boarder, other times as the strangers within (Collins, 1986) the organizational culture of our faculty.

DESIGN OF STUDY

Our understanding of a “betwixt and between” state of transitioning into the faculty began to take shape as we expressed our individual and collective needs to make meaning of our experiences as new or returning faculty. We acknowledged that our own learning processes were significantly shaped through reflection, context, and social exchange (Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 2007). Through liminality and a social constructivist lens we made meaning of our experiences by story sharing and engaging in open dialogue. Social constructivists maintain that, when individuals engage in social talk and activity with one another to address a particular problem or task, there is great potential for knowledge construction (Merriam et al., 2007). Liminality and social constructivism guided our dialogues as we shared and explored experiences, problems, and coping strategies; all related to an environment that we sought to navigate meaningfully and successfully.

The overall design of this qualitative, interpretive study reflects our values and vision as academics in transition. Recognizing that our research was being guided by a social-constructivist epistemology, we sought a methodology and method that aligned to our philosophical stance. Subsequently, we were guided by elements of autoethnographic methodology and dialogue as method in our data collection and analysis processes.

Autoethnography and Dialogue

In autoethnography, participants seek to gain a deeper understanding of a particular culture by sharing and exploring personal stories of self and others within that culture. Autoethnography is a personal and evocative mode of discourse that profoundly impacts the autoethnographer *and* those receiving the stories. The authors, through courageously revisiting their own stories, make deeper meaning of their lived experience through story sharing with others. This evocative disclosure often compels others to reflect more meaningfully and purposefully upon their own story and creates space for a collective understanding of experiences and for knowledge co-creation. Constructed in first person narrative, autoethnography connects the personal to the cultural; the self and others are positioned within a social context (Reed-Danahay, 1997). Richardson (2000) emphasized that the self as researcher and the lived self are not separate. Stories carry deep meaning *beyond* the story teller and serve as a medium that stimulates a deeper understanding and appreciation of cultural

issues and dynamics (Ellis & Bochner, 1996). A methodology regarded as somewhat controversial, autoethnography has gained much momentum and attention over the past 10 years. Maguire (2006) maintained that autoethnography can represent events in diverse and powerful ways that traditional research texts cannot. Autoethnography is also a powerful medium for sharing tacit knowledge. Research supports that participating in autoethnography can be transformational for many individuals regarding the personal and professional growth and development they experienced within their organizations (Goodier & Eisenberg, 2006; Hayano, 1979; Kawalilak, 2004; Richardson, 2000).

Coupling autoethnography with dialogue was sensitive to our natural tendency as social beings, regardless of cultural differences, to seek to create meaning in relationships. Soler and Racionero (2004), drawing from the work of Freire, Habermas, Vygotsky and Bakhtin, emphasized “the role of human interactions in the creation of meaning and the transformation of [cultures]” (p.8). Soler and Racionero (2004) recognized the “tendency in people’s social practices and relationships towards dialogue” (p.7) and elaborated on the need of humankind “to negotiate new meanings and to come to agreements. . . in their relationships” (p.7/8). In this study we sought to negotiate new meaning with one another and with our faculty culture (Ellinor & Gerard, 1998; Maslow & Lowery, 1998; Palmer, 2000). It was for this reason that engaging in dialogue was our chosen method of data collection.

Dialogue is about clearing a space for an exchange of feelings, perspectives and ideas, rather than bringing tightly held agendas into a space in an attempt to entice another to perceive something from our point of view. Bohm (1998) maintained that dialogue was honouring and respectful of others and contributed to healthy community formation. Experiencing dialogue aligns to the Greek origin of the word: *dia* refers to *through* and *logos* to *meaning*. By sharing significant learning moments through stories, we sought to make meaning of our individual and collective understanding and experiences of our academic community.

Respectful, attentive listening, open-mindedness and honesty are critical to a deep dialogue experience (Belenky, McVicker, Clinchy, Rule Goldberger, & Mattuck Tarule, 1986; Wheatley, 2002). Structured dialogues are designed to guide the exchange of participants around a particular topic; other dialogue forms are (often) less structured. Unstructured dialogues provide space for participants to navigate the dialogue in whatever direction the participants need it to go. Sharing our stories invited dialogue around our experiences as new and returning faculty. This evolved into a symbiotic process, as story sharing invited dialogue and dialogue, subsequently, served as an invitation to share more deeply the stories of our lived experiences (Ross, 1992). Both were conceived and experienced as appropriate choices of methodology and method.

Researcher – Participants

We are three women, researcher-participants, all making mid-career transitions from administrative positions to full-time tenured or tenure-track faculty.

Collectively, we bring over 50 years of professional experience. Although our individual pathways to the faculty of education have been dissimilar, our common ground lies in our transition to an academic position from an environment where we had each experienced “success.” In spite of not fitting the new professor fresh out of graduate school archetype, we were all “new” in that we were unable to explain to one another the “why” of what seemed strange about the situation we found ourselves in.

Data Collection and Analysis

This study draws from elements of autoethnography. It is an account of our experiences and we decided to allow our *voices* to speak, but not to identify ourselves in each quotation. Our research consisted of three audio-taped dialogues that occurred near the beginning, middle and end of 2006. Although two of us took up our academic positions in 2004, the other in 2006, we all shared similar feelings of being new.

Each dialogue lasted between one and one-half to two and one-half hours in duration. Multiple tape recorders ran simultaneously so that we could each take the tapes and listen to them, post-dialogue. Two dialogues unfolded in one of our university offices. Dialogue three occurred in one of our homes; this provided for an added degree of comfort. Meeting behind “closed campus doors” suggested secrecy or exclusion; this was not our intention.

Individually reviewing and analysing tapes “post dialogue” provided an opportunity for each of us to explore the tapes for emergent themes. We believed this to be important before proceeding to the next dialogue. We then met to share our individual thematic analyses and interpretations. Common perspectives were shared, diverse interpretations were explored, and consistencies were sought. We did not audio-tape our collective data analysis sessions although, at times, discussion around emergent themes from the previous dialogue found its way into our subsequent dialogue(s). The simultaneous analysis of data with the data collection was an important element of our research as this provided an opportunity to consistently reflect on the data while organizing and discovering what the data had to say (Glesne, 1999).

After having gone through this process for each of the three dialogues, we gathered together once again to explore patterns, linkages, images that described our individual and collective experiences, metaphors, and meaning of all dialogues in their entirety. It was at this point in our analysis that we differentiated between themes, sub-themes, images and metaphors. We also identified two critical factors that significantly impacted our individual reflections: 1) differences in our respective transitioning experiences relative to our previous histories as academics; and 2) the fact that we had each entered or reentered the faculty at different times. We recognized that the experiences of a seasoned professional, transitioning from administration to an academic position, were markedly different from those of a novice, parachuting into academia from a community-based, professional position.

Limitations of this study include a small participant sample, being from the same university and faculty, gender specificity, and the inclusion of two “seasoned” and one “novice” participant within the same study.

EMERGENT THEMES AND DISCUSSION

As liminal beings in flux regarding our professional identities, we came together as community members to engage in dialogue. Initially, our expressed intent was to seek confirmation, support and affirmation of our experiences, to understand what it means to be an academic in this particular context, and to better determine what counts as significant and valued work. Our experiences in navigating the academic landscape and exploring factors that contributed to and detracted from the co-creation of communities that thrive, then evolved as the research objectives for this study.

The isolationist culture of the academy and the lack of time or opportunity to develop professional relationships meant that we were on our own to negotiate our new identity and make sense of the roles, responsibilities, and expectations ascribed to our new position. There was no designated person or series of events to shepherd us through this transition. Turner’s (1967) research on liminality found that there were typically guides and rites of passages – events that helped individuals negotiate this undefined status, and to provide some stability to prepare them for the transition to their new status (Bettis et al., 2005). We found ourselves in this paradoxical situation where we had developed effective professional habits that facilitated our success in our previous roles; yet we experienced confusion and anxiety in attempting to adapt these habits to our new role in the faculty.

Four themes emerged from our dialogues: 1) exploring the landscape; 2) professional competence and identities; 3) competition and isolation; and 4) seeking support and validation. These themes reflect our search for some kind of agency to reclaim our professional identity and sense of competence, to overcome our feelings of isolation, and to find validation and support from each other. We wanted to learn how to cross the border and find our place in our new academic community.

Exploring the Landscape

“Where is my community?” (Cole, 1999, p.285), a question commonly expressed by faculty, reflects the loneliness and isolation of working in a university institution. University managerial practices and reward systems “[el-levate] individualism over community, competition over collegiality, quantity over quality, and secrecy over openness” (Skolnik, 1998, p.16). This results in some faculty members yearning for a collaborative context within which to teach and make sense of their work. Taylor (1991) explained that in our culture, “we are expected to develop our own opinions, outlook, and stances to things, to considerable degree through solitary reflection.” (p.33). However,

it is through dialogue with others that we become full human agents, capable of negotiating our identity and understanding ourselves (Taylor, 1991). Weick (1995) referred to this process as “sense making” in which we arrange our perceptions and experiences and establish their meanings. We then rely on these meanings to structure our subsequent perceptions and interpretations (Bettis et al., 2005).

It was out of a deep sense of anxiety and the urgent need to ground our personal and professional identity in this new context that we consciously constructed a community where we could engage in dialogue to make sense of our experiences and arrange our perceptions. While we all had direct experience of working in this setting, we found ourselves on unfamiliar terrain as we took up our positions and identities as professors and colleagues. We were anxious to uncover the nuances of faculty protocol, social conventions, and expectations of the role and contributions of professors. We knew, through our collective wisdom and experience, that we could provide different vantage points to making our way through this transitional period.

One of us was an established academic and a tenured full professor who had spent most of her 27 years at universities in central administration where she had clear responsibilities and a high level of accountability:

I have learned to trust myself in the process of having to learn what my new role is here and I have a frame of reference based on my past experience. I want to know how to do things right. I have a low tolerance for incompetence, especially my own. I know that I must learn the lay of the land – there must be a right and wrong way to do things.

A second colleague, also a tenured full professor, was making the transition back to her academic position after spending six years in senior university administration. She experienced the paradoxical situation in which she was familiar with and had been successful in the “old” faculty culture; however, in the period that she was away there had been a shift in the organizational culture and she found she could not rely on these past experiences to make sense of where to go now. She described her experience as “*free falling and looking for the signpost of where to land.*” She explained, “*In a university culture that values independence, you are left alone to do what you want or need to do, and it seems that nobody checks in until you do something really wrong.*” Our third colleague, a newly appointed assistant professor, was making a transition from an accomplished 20 year career as a counselor/adult educator in postsecondary education to taking up a position as a tenure-track professor. She too was in this paradoxical situation of being familiar with the faculty culture from her experience as a graduate student and sessional instructor. She now sought to negotiate her new identity as a faculty member:

There is great cultural shock in stepping beyond the familiar, in stepping to the edge of knowing where I once felt a sense of comfort and

a confidence in knowledge acquired. Now I feel like I am in an entirely new country, a country where I am unsure of the language, the traditions and the norms. It is a humbling experience indeed. The most difficult part is determining how to navigate this new landscape. there are no road signs. . . where to I stop to ask my questions? Sometimes I can't even find the road!

As three women who had grown and developed in administrative careers and as adult educators, we were accustomed to getting things done and to doing things well. We experienced frustration in not being able to get answers to questions, having to work through issues of power, gender, and access to knowledge, and having to wend our way through a maze of bureaucracy where support staff were the primary keepers of navigational knowledge. Individually, we needed to knit together information fragments, relying on the good will of our colleagues to fill the gaps. As liminal beings, we were ascribed "structural invisibility" (Turner, 1967, p.99). We felt "betwixt and between" as we negotiated our new identity and status in the faculty culture. Through dialogue, we admitted to this challenge:

The experience of not feeling heard or understood is converted easily to anger because you don't feel empowered to do anything. In fact it devalues your lived experience. In working with men in positions of power I find they sometimes don't give you all the information you need. They are like gatekeepers. Knowledge has currency to it. Without the complete story we have to figure it out on our own.

We discussed a variety of reasons why the needed information was often given in "pieces."

Perhaps it is that men think in pieces, like 'this is what you need to know to get this part done'; or maybe it really is about power. It is like giving a nibble is almost a benevolent thing to do, and you are now dependent on them to get the next piece. Even when I was in administration I was seldom empowered with the knowledge and authority necessary to complete the project. There was always a missing piece that took me back to those with positional power.

Dialogue provided a safe place to both clarify and work out answers to our questions:

In our conversations we don't feel compelled to agree or disagree, but we are prepared to listen to the concerns, questions and experiences of others. It is encouraging to hear stories from other women and to be affirmed that I am not alone or crazy to have that thought or ask that question. It is like having a safe resting space to work out complicated ideas or feelings.

As one colleague elaborated:

It is all about the relational for me. I go into the hallways and I look for open doors. I have a strong need to connect deeply with people. It is not that I go out in search of information; I go in search of relationship. Over time, others are increasingly willing to share information and knowledge with me.

Our dialogues unfolded like illuminated pathways through the labyrinth of academic bureaucracy and cultural complexity. We came to the realization that we did not have to risk this adventure alone; we just had to uncover the thread of the path created by those who had gone before us (Campbell, 1988).

Professional Competence and Identity

Unlike a true novice, we brought a sense of personal confidence acquired from many years of experience. We were, however, conscious of feelings of incompetence in this new academic culture. We wanted to find a short cut to information and experiences that could make us feel competent. When competent people are unable to find answers or direction, this “lack of knowing” can lead to a fear of mediocrity, of being perceived as incompetent. This culminates in feelings of unworthiness because we receive little indication of whether or not we are making valued contributions. We agreed that we all had low tolerance and impatience for this state of being:

I am in crisis and I see this state as both danger and opportunity. I am used to doing things 180%. My kids tell me to think about this as a job since “this isn’t your whole life!” but I invest so much of myself in my work. When I stepped away from my administrative position I lost what I valued most, my identity, my sense of self and purpose. And in spite of our diverse backgrounds, we are more alike than we are different in that we are “all” novices. I am a novice in this area and yet an expert in my field. We are attempting to navigate this new ground. As an expert in something, you know there is something such as expertise, so as a novice I am aware of this.

The difficulty in an academic culture is that you tend to stumble onto what one needs to know, rather than being guided to what you need to know or where you might find answers to what you need to know. Each faculty and department has its own subculture and, aside from a formal induction ceremony for faculty new to the university, often there are no formal mentorship programs or handbooks outlining professorial duties and responsibilities. New faculty often learn through observation and doing. The traditional markers of success remain, such as annual assessments for merit pay, and achieving tenure and promotion through the academic ranks; however, reaching those benchmarks is still a right of passage and each person’s experience is unique.

Competition and Isolation

In our period of transition, we all needed to overcome our feelings of isolation and to hear the stories of others. We needed to make sense of the way things were done. As one colleague explained:

We are feeling insecure because we lack community and information. Administrators sometimes think that communication means bulletins sent out via the email. . . this is not a substitute for discussion, support and fostering understanding. We need and want community. . . we need to meet and discuss ideas and concerns.

Another colleague offered her perspective:

When we are not clear about what is valued or what the expectations are in terms of merit and promotion, this uncertainty results in a competitive culture steeped in fear. We are subjected to those few vocal professors who are always telling you about the paper they just published. . . what award they have been nominated for. Since we don't hear any counter stories, we begin to fear that these people are the norm, that this is what is expected of everyone. Since we aren't doing nearly as much as these people, and when we have no perspective on what everyone else is really doing, we become fearful and withdraw. This competitive culture fosters fear and the development of exclusive clubs or groups.

A third added:

It is extremely difficult to function as a community of colleagues and scholars in a competitive culture. The paradox is that the very competitive structures that sustain our culture tout a vision and philosophy promoting collaboration, community and relationship. At least in industry, people readily admit to the competition.

Drawing from our various areas of expertise and experience we offered to mentor each other through our transition processes. The requirement to teach graduate courses on line was the most daunting and unfamiliar task before us. We agreed to share course outlines and provide access to our on-line course shells. We became guests in each other's on-line courses to gain the experience of being an on-line learner and, on occasion, were physically present to observe how we each taught on line. We also discussed the rhythm of our day, how to manage our unstructured time, and our experiences of the annual assessment process. By demystifying our transition experiences, we began to feel valued for the contributions we were making to one another's development.

The image of a silo emerged as we shared feelings and experiences of isolation and loneliness in working in our faculty. One colleague elaborated on the metaphor:

Silos extend up and down, not across. Each faculty is a silo. . . and then there are silos within silos. I envision putting all of our strength into tipping these silos over, to opening up to authentic dialogue. In this way we can connect the ends so that silos serve as bridges, not barriers to community evolution and sustenance.

A second colleague continued:

Silos are very “lonely.” They are merely containers for silage for pigs and cattle. Without circulation or proper ventilation, the silage becomes rancid and combustible. To realize the full nutritional value of silage, the rancher must add molasses and mix it around.

We were creating our own support group to nourish one another and to provide safe spaces to vent our frustrations, fears and to celebrate our accomplishments. Clearly, this was preferable to a slow decay or to one day combusting!

We then shifted the silo metaphor to that of a rain stick because it reflected our desire to experience the beautiful organic sound made when the bits of rice sealed within the stick tumble together. One of us said:

When you hold up a rain stick there is no sound, but as soon as you tip it, there is the beautiful sound of the little bits tumbling together along the long corridor from one end to the other.

Another of us concluded: “Perhaps we are all just rain sticks within the silos just needing to be tipped!”

Seeking Support and Validation

As mid-career women with experience and professional success, we had little patience for playing games. Having held administrative positions in post-secondary institutions, and having all made mid-career transitions, we were not willing to be silenced or to not find the answers we were seeking. We asked questions that, at times, challenged the status quo:

There is this “old boys” view that you have to figure it out yourself to be successful. Figuring it out is part of the ropes course you go through. It is a rite of passage. If you screw up along the way then you will learn from that. “Real men” can just dust themselves off and move forward. The fear for some is that if you get the short course then you will also gain positional advantage. That is the ladder thing. Knowledge is power, and the withholding of knowledge creates distrust. We are in a culture of not knowing, a culture of distrust and fear. Feelings of insecurity may, for some, contribute to high productivity and focus. I think this is short lived, however. Inevitably, fear contributes to mediocrity, incompetence and a fragile sense of identity. Insecurity has many faces and corrupts any sense of community.

One colleague elaborated further, “People who come to this culture younger and with less experience don’t expect to know that much. But the danger is they are ‘unconsciously incompetent’ and we have a heightened sensitivity to this, having all been competent previously.”

Another of us added:

When we ask questions we are perceived as a threat although we are asking for clarification. We are viewed as having power because of our previous positions; therefore, the questions seem to have more meaning. While we view ourselves as colleagues seeking information (and are well aware of our lack of power), the perception of those now in power has not changed. They see us as being connected and as challenging them. We don’t want their job; we just want to feel competent here.

Through dialogue, it became apparent that we were really looking for validation, guidance, and support. In a knowledge enterprise, such as a university, knowledge is the dominant currency. Knowledge is power and limiting access to the knowledge provides a competitive advantage. We were not interested in positional advantage, scaling silos, climbing a ladder, or doing a ropes course. We were simply seeking the opportunity to share our knowledge because it emerged from our experience. By sharing it we received feedback, a perception check on how we were coming to understand our experiences. We also felt acknowledged that our experiences were valid and valuable and ultimately, this helped us to feel more visible.

Although we became aware of our tendency to intellectualize our “transition” experiences, significant time was also spent on practical issues such as how to access basic resources (e.g., printer paper and pens). We also sought clarification of performance expectations before we engaged more deeply on experiences and issues that pertained to feelings of inadequacy and powerlessness. It would appear that the culture of intellectualization and rationalization, as an aspect of academic life, also permeates the experience of individuals in transition to it. However, with the creation of a supportive culture, it was possible to see the evolution of the content and topics discussed to a problem-solving approach, with offers of assistance and support, as well as recommendations as to how new faculty could be mentored more effectively.

Finally, what became evident through our dialogues was the interrelatedness of the emergent themes and their corresponding images. When analyzing each of the taped dialogues, we became aware the common thread was the need for a sense of agency and knowledge. Our dialogues helped us to explore our feelings of powerlessness and incompetence. Through dialogue, we came to know the importance of trust, safety and support. One of us explained:

Our dialogues have become my safe space. Safe space does not always mean that it is “easy”. . . I experience this as where I can take a challenge and where I know I will be supported in the challenge.

It was within this safe space that we also shared perceptions and experiences as to the supportive aspects of our faculty culture. Specifically, we reflected on the authentic desire of many colleagues to find meaningful ways to connect as a healthy and life-giving community; the diversity of faculty with whom we were all privileged to associate; innovative programs that encouraged creativity; and, the exceptional level of scholarly activity that surrounded us.

Indeed, the tensions of cultural navigation, within an ever-changing landscape, remained; but we no longer felt as isolated or fearful. The laughter and tears associated with our sharing helped to significantly shift the fulcrum; our need for and commitment to the co-creation of community became our priority. We understood that within healthy community, there *are* spaces for individual achievement. Within community safe space, however, individual achievements ultimately inform and reform the very community of which that we, as individuals, are privileged to be a members.

REFLECTIVE SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Our objective in this study was to explore and describe our experiences of being in transition and of how we coped with negotiating our professional identity to fit the role and expectations of an unfamiliar faculty culture without anyone to shepherd us through the process. We were cognizant that the organizational culture of the Faculty of Education was regulated by an inherited and pre-existing implicit social structure that shaped the field of professional identity of female professors (Acker & Dillabough, 2007). We wanted access to the cultural codes of conduct and habits that would help us to be successful and competent members of the faculty. Those of us with experience and tenure had the confidence to speak out and talk back to those with positional power, to ask questions and to challenge the status quo.

Our study reflects the experiences of three women; however, there were other faculty members going through this transition process at the same time, but who dealt with the tensions by withdrawal, working from home, or staying behind closed doors. Our response was perhaps indicative of our gender – to create a safe and caring sub-community to support and guide each other through the process. There is a need for further research into how faculty members experience and negotiate their professional identity in a changing academic landscape. Bourdieu's (2001; 1998; 1990) work in the area of habitus, field theory and gender could inform this work (also see Acker & Dillabough, 2007).

Academics, not unlike the rest of humankind, seek inclusion, affirmation, and a sense of belonging to a greater community. For those of us who are "betwixt and between" in the stages of our academic careers, we found that by co-creating space for dialogue and story-sharing it was possible to contribute to dissembling power differentials, to sustain healthy communities, and to value knowledge acquired from outside traditional academic arenas.

Transitions within a university are interesting because academics, new or returning, have some familiarity with the culture of academia, and vestiges of past experiences continue to be part of the faculty member's lives; however, old habits, roles, and identity have to be adapted to the new culture. This transition can be eased by departments or faculties developing processes, such as new faculty orientation meetings, mentorship programs, locating new faculty in offices near established faculty, team teaching new courses, and most importantly, formal and informal opportunities for faculty to come together and share knowledge and experience. It can also be eased by individual faculty members becoming aware that they are in the process of transition themselves and that they may need to take the initiative to seek out the assistance and support of others should it not be provided for them.

Co-creating healthy life-giving cultures takes time. Wheatley (2005) reminds us that we need to reclaim time to be together, to listen, worry and dream (p.5). Wheatley (1996) explains that "systems emerge as individuals decide how they can live together [and as] a new entity arises, with new capacities and increased stability" (p. 33). Indeed, certain aspects of university culture help us to flourish as independent intellectuals. However, "it is time to rethink faculty work and workplaces" (Gappa et al., 2007, p. 2) and to seek post-heroic forms of leadership that value inclusive, collaborative communities and conceptualize leadership as a social process in which practices are shared and enacted by people at all levels (Fletcher, 2004; Eveline, 2004). By studying the experiences of three of us who were "betwixt and between," we hope that we have contributed to this rethinking and have encouraged others to do the same. ♣

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