

## Teachers' Narratives: career trajectories and approaches to teaching

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### Introduction

University Teachers are as complex and diverse as their students; they are not an homogeneous group, nor do they wish to become one. The question is does this matter and if so, might such 'teacher differences' affect learning?

The work aims to shed light on teaching, careers, self-actualisation and socialisation for teacher and student, considers what it means to be an HE teacher with a non-traditional background and shows implications this has for learning. It focuses on Legal Practice Course (LPC) teachers - the LPC is a postgraduate, vocational HE course for solicitors.

### Method

To delve more deeply not only into the career trajectories of LPC teachers, understand their life choices and what brought them to their current positions but *also* to learn something about what these experiences might mean for their own learning and teaching, a limited number of interviews was undertaken to enable them to tell their own stories. Volunteer subjects were sought from two contrasting teaching institutions; one where the majority of students are from so-called non-traditional backgrounds, the other where the predominant student body was traditional. They were assured of anonymity as in the small community of LPC teachers this assurance was essential and occasionally led to surprising frankness. Interviews were semi-structured, recorded, transcribed and analysed following Denzin's Interpretive Strategy method (Denzin 1989) with the help of NVivo software.

The number of interviews was small (six), but the balance of interviewees was good as in the study there were:-

- equal numbers of men and women and
- half were from one institution, half from the other where
- some had taught for over ten years, while others were in their first year of teaching

One of the interviewees came from a so-called traditional background. All interviewees were White and two were Irish. Again, all interviewees were personally known to me and so telling their stories to me, an “insider”, made a difference. This is clearly apparent in some of the interviews.

### **The interviews – a summary**

Although mostly happy as undergraduate students, fewer were happy with the vocational stage of their training and then, as real practice began, their views changed again. Not everyone was happy with their career choice and there is a stark gender divide – all the women were happy in practice whereas, none of the men was.

Two male interviewees seemed to find the work less fulfilling than anticipated describing it as “...really mindless work which a monkey could do...” and “...drudgery...”.

Remarkably, all bar one of those interviewed mentioned negative aspects of personalities or culture in the legal practice environment. For example, about the personalities of practice colleagues: - “...the kind of ego-centred personalities sometimes that are attracted to law...”. Then, leaving practice “...because of the people I ended up working under, really...”; “...she was a bit unusual, shall we say...”; “...full of slightly odd people...”; “...one other partner who was just a bully, basically...”

On the culture of practice: - “...I was getting bullied more and more at work...the work ethic is quite dysfunctional...”; “...it wasn’t an overly-healthy environment – it wasn’t an environment I wanted to stay in...”; and worse “... it was a toxic job...”.

In higher education teaching, they seem to have found their niche (except one), “I absolutely love doing this”, is a typical expression. All bar one seem to have found what Schein calls a ‘career anchor’ but here, it is the interviewee with a ‘traditional’ background who stands apart. Being in practice has fed into their teaching not simply in providing examples and anecdotes but by bolstering their confidence, especially at the start – “at the end of the day I know that I did it in practice and I’ve done it and they haven’t and therefore I’m quite capable of telling them what they need to know.” Two of the men were particularly vehement about not wanting to return to practice – “I’ve said I’d rather work in Marks and Spencer on the tills than be a solicitor again”.

All LPC teachers are asked by students why they are no longer in practice. Although all the women and one man would return if circumstances permitted, there is a definite lack of frankness by all with students about life in practice. Some lie, others consciously fudge the truth – “now that’s the truth (about the reason for leaving) it isn’t the whole truth...I don’t really feel that I would be telling them my truth because it might not be their truth” or give their version of the truth, “I just sort of paint it as a

*lifestyle thing and leave it at that*". What none of them does is tell the whole story, as they told it to me, about their lives in practice.

## Teaching and career implications

The sample all identified with their students, seeing in them reflections of themselves – *"because that's their dream at the moment and I was like them"*. Those who teach at the institution with a majority of non-traditional students, all expressed their appreciation of the satisfaction this brought. One insightful comment was, however, *"sometimes I think they overplay the element to which they're helping the students and helping society...I don't have a (name of institution) saviour complex that we're changing the world"*.

This sample of teachers quite clearly brings their pre-teaching experience and beliefs into their teaching; examples include reference to the love of learning, desire to help the oppressed, strong Christian belief, all of which they say influence their work, as Taylor and Sobel suggest (Taylor and Sobel 2001). It is not possible to say if all LPC teachers feel this way.

With one exception, they did not fit the image of a traditional HE student or of a practising solicitor. The literature would suggest they might feel uncomfortable in HE, yet that is not really the case. There is, instead, evidence that *"our pasts are a strength, a means of connecting with our own student's lives"* (Tokarczyk and Fay 1993, p.137).

As degree students, only one mentions feeling an 'outsider'. None of the rest mentions such a feeling but it may be worth noting that all bar one attended a post-1992 ('new') university. However, once into practice, the picture changes and more expressed that feeling - a sense of not quite fitting the image they had of these professionals *"there were all people you know like asking me where I read law and actually I went to (new University) and you don't read it there, you just do it. Do you know what I mean?"*

There is some evidence of respondents engaging in "passing" behaviour (in this context – 'to attempt to disguise working-class origins by outwardly adopting codes of behaviour that come from outside working-class experience' (Sowinska in Vargas 2004, p.152); they talk of efforts to seem to fit in even though this was an act– *"I could role play with clients. I could act confident. I could do stuff, I was role-playing. I wasn't me. It was never me. But it kind of worked."* . Similarly, academics exhibiting 'Impostor Complex', 'fear they've scammed others into giving them doctorates and academic positions and constantly have to prove themselves and others that they're worthy' (Tokarczyk and Fay 1993, p.17). Another description of its effects is in Clark's contribution *'Most of us, I think, carry a sense of not fully belonging, of being pretenders to a kingdom not ours by birthright'* (*ibid.*, p.137)

Here, however, only one interviewee (the traditional university entrant) touched on ideas of 'passing' or being 'an impostor' now that they work within higher education. Despite saying "*most of the students are following exactly the same route as me*", this person felt they were actually laughed at by students "*I certainly found in my first term I certainly felt I was being laughed at*".

For the rest, there is a sense that their experience in practice, however unpleasant or unfulfilling, has equipped them to deal confidently with their specific teaching – "*I couldn't have been this teacher based on academic ability without being a solicitor first*". These LPC teachers reflect none of bell hook's predicted compromises as HE teachers (Tokarczyk and Fay, 1993, pp.103, 108), though they may have felt outsiders in past jobs. Their students may eventually feel the same but perhaps in practice some could remain with feelings like this – 'And I never have, I never will, attend one such function without looking surreptitiously around, .....trying to spot my kind: *who's here who wasn't born knowing how to do this?*' (Clark Smith in *ibid.*, p.132).

### **Socialising into law**

The LPC contains a significant element of such socialising but the LPC may not be the start of the process. There is evidence in these interviews that certain LPC students have already acquired a surfeit of self-confidence, enough to make them "scary" adversaries who take no prisoners in the classroom, particularly with new teachers. These students already seem to have some of the attitudes and prejudices found by my sample in practice. On socialisation, there is evidence that the academic stage marks the initiation.

Like this country, Australia and many Commonwealth countries, the United States has a common law system, this commonality making their education of lawyers worthy of comparison with our own. In this respect, it may be argued that despite its academic bias, a US law degree bears some similarity to our LPC in its socialisation effects. 'Most of us assume that some of what happens in law school affects law, lawyers and lawyering' (Rhode 1992, p.1554). Work done by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching found that 'Law School provides rapid socialisation into the standards of legal thinking' (Sullivan et al 2007, p.5). Lawyers learn in Law School how to be tough, compete and survive.

Does studying in the UK make a difference? Before they reach the LPC, students will be taught by legal academics whose identity and culture will influence those who study with them. Cownie discovered that this 'academic tribe' is as often conflicted in their identity as my sample (Cownie, 2004). For legal academic success, she found that class (amongst other things), is an issue and this is the atmosphere within which all practitioners begin their journey into practice. It is hard to imagine this has no effect.

Link this with the observation that many legal academics have tried practice before returning to academia and conflict begins to emerge in the messages given to students about who stays in practice and who leaves. 'Returning' non-traditional academics choose their places carefully – "*It's probably why I've always worked in a new university. It's to do with what you regard as an environment sympathetic to your background*" (Cownie, 2004, p.179) – it may be no accident that LPC is predominantly taught at new universities and that is where almost my entire sample studied for their degree.

### **Preparation for practice**

The LPC makes extensive use of what Barab and Duffy describe as "practice fields" – "contexts in which learners, as opposed to legitimate participants, can practice the kinds of activities that they will encounter outside" (Barab and Duffy, 1998, p.5). Their analysis argues that until learners actually enter a workplace, education is merely producing an approximation, not a community, and that there is a lack of authenticity. LPC students often complain about how "fake" the role play activities are on the course (Fletcher 2004, p.57). This is not the only area where LPC teaching seems to lack authenticity.

Newcomers into any organisation will seek out role models and lawyers are no exception (Filstad 2004). My interviewees indicated that they know they are role models and they have a marked unwillingness to exert undue influence. Work elsewhere has shown how important a role model is – what a teacher demonstrates to students, students take into practice with them (Reuler and Nardone 1994). However, 'Observation without being able to interact with role models is insufficient' in order to begin to create a community of practice (Filstad 2004). If a lack of frankness on practice life inhibits interaction then this, together with the lack of authenticity mentioned above, could well have an impact on what is learned. This seems to reflect here what Resnick observed of the US Law Schools – that they do not tell it like it is. 'Even as we tell of the horrors of the many forms of discrimination, we somehow continue to tell of the joys of legalism and the hope that we can 'fix' it' (Resnick 1992, p.5)

Nevertheless, does this stage of legal education produce competent practitioners? For the men in my sample the evidence is that it didn't – they did not function well by their own accounts and two of them were unpleasantly surprised by the more tedious elements of practice. But no interviewee ever tells the students about the less attractive side to practice. This looks like an example of the "dualistic approach to professional education" (Eraut 2000, p.123). He explains there is a mismatch between the theories a profession espouses as its theoretical base and the use of those theories in practice. The espoused theories "represent the way professionals like to see themselves and present themselves to the public" but in reality what happens in practice "would not be deemed fit for public communication" as it would diminish the image of the profession (*ibid.*, p.123). This duality comes at a price

which he argues leads to either “scepticism or to frustration and burn out; the third route is to become professional educators and perpetuate the cycle” (*ibid.*, p.123). LPC teachers fit the third category. Two of my sample had breakdowns while in practice and this does seem disproportionately high, even in a small sample. Perhaps the LPC could be risking leaving students to sink or swim in the community of practice they enter.

## **Discussion**

Reflecting on the above, two major themes emerge:-

1. These teachers do not describe the feelings of passing or impostor complex that appear prevalent in other areas of academia.
2. In their teaching they do not tell all they know about the practice life for which they are preparing students.

A key question then arises:- why is this sample (all except one) seemingly so much at home in their sector of HE, despite coming from non-traditional backgrounds? Where articulated this derives from having done the job and gained confidence from it. These lawyers achieved their ambitions, even if they did not stay with practice. Perhaps from their background becoming a teacher is as valid a career choice as lawyer (there is evidence for this in the interviews). Perhaps teaching seems a bit of a come-down for the traditional entrant and that explains the difference.

If this analysis held true, the future for teaching in HE as the widening participation effects seep into staffing may not result in the staff feeling uncomfortable, as might be predictable from the work of Vargas and Tokarczyk and Fay. By sheer weight of numbers, non-traditional academics would feel happier and less obviously different from both fellow staff and students.

The sample in this study suggests that role models may not be essential for students from non-traditional backgrounds. What was demonstrated was an awareness of the value to one’s career of a degree from a prestigious university and the handicap to one’s career of a degree from Universities lacking in prestige. Whilst for lawyers it is received wisdom that more staff from minority ethnic backgrounds help students with the same backgrounds, this may not be as important as instilling a sense of value in the worth of what is achieved by *all* less advantaged students, whoever may teach them.

The other main theme deals with the issue of my sample not telling ‘the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth’ about their time in practice. There is, and will continue to be a price to pay for this since students already perceive a lack of authenticity on the LPC that hinders the effectiveness of their learning. Additionally, some of them may feel disappointed as those in my sample did, when they hit the reality of practice without having had any feedback about the reality. This may also

contribute to the less pleasant aspects of the culture of legal practice; for the high levels of alcoholism and substance abuse, breakdown etc (see [www.lawcare.org.uk](http://www.lawcare.org.uk) for details) could be traced in some part to the gap between expectations and reality (Eraut 2000). For entrants from non-traditional backgrounds, the sense of disappointment when their improbable goal has been reached could be even more acute. Alternatively, though, they may have fewer preconceptions about practice and therefore have less to be disappointed about in the reality. However this is only speculation as my sample sheds no definitive light on these aspects.

A wholly commendable reason for teachers' reticence in revealing the true nature of practice as they see it is that they recognise their responsibilities towards these students and do not want to deter them from realising ambitions. This in its way has its own kind of integrity and it would be inappropriate and unhelpful to propose the classroom become a confessional. On the other hand it could be helpful for there to be some way of communicating more clearly the reality of practice. 'Blogs' by alumni, chat rooms, a short course on practice survival are all possible solutions. Clinical education, guest lectures, pro bono work and work shadowing do have potential but are often more sanitised than enlightening about reality. Of course, the influence of employers cannot be ignored – where they pay for students, they do not want, quite understandably, that investment tarnished.

## Conclusion

By looking at LPC teachers some valuable insights have been gained that may be of use more widely within the sector. Where the LPC is now, the rest of HE may follow.

The teachers in this study from non-traditional backgrounds are comfortable in the role, so perhaps discomfort is not inevitable for future non-traditional academics. They bring strengths that others may learn from and more research into how the particular capabilities of such staff may be harnessed could prove beneficial.

The difficulties of authenticity and candidness within the vocational practice field are ones the LPC has *not* dealt with as yet and this research may be its first articulation. With warning perhaps the wider HE sector could research and prepare to do better in this respect, by, for example, making better use of the stories teachers (and students) can tell.

There is a lack of research into the teaching and learning perspectives of teachers as well as learners (Neumann 2001) and my hope is that this study begins to redress the balance.

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