ABSTRACT AND PROPOSAL

Title:
Fostering and Restraining a Community of Academic Learning:
Possibilities and Pressures in a Postgraduate and Early Career Researcher Group at an Australian University

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Aims
This paper is part of a series of analyses of the operations and outcomes of a postgraduate and early career researcher community of academic learning at an Australian university (see also Danaher, 2008).
   The study has three aims:
- To map the group's approaches and activities
- To conduct a theoretically informed analysis of those approaches and activities
- To link the findings of that analysis with broader issues attending contemporary higher education, including academic work and communities of learning.

The purpose of the study is to contribute to the ongoing interrogation and theorisation of academic work and its potential contribution to academic learning and academics'

professional and personal identities (Beck & Young, 2005; Danaher, Danaher & Danaher, 2008; Harris, 2005; Henkel, 2005; Houston, Luanna & Paewai, 2006; Lee & Boud, 2003; Menzies & Newson, 2008; Scott, 2003).

Research questions
The study has two principal research questions:
- What is the range of activities and outcomes related to the operation of a postgraduate and early career researcher group at an Australian university?
- How do those activities and outcomes foster and restrain the group's status and effectiveness as a community of academic learning?

Methodology
The study's methodology is centred on the planning and enactment of a single, exploratory case study (Yin, 2002, 2003), guided by appropriate ethical principles. Data collection has focused on documents and other artefacts associated with the group's operations, as well as the author's reflections on involvement in the group.

Data analysis
Data analysis has been informed by two techniques: the transformative approach to textual and thematic analysis (Rowan, 2001), which highlights the gaps and silences, as much as what is present and included, in texts; and autoethnography (Buzard, 2003; Holt, 2003), which emphasises the reflexivity of participant observers.

Findings
Findings are clustered around three discursive tensions and two major findings arising from the study. The discursive tensions relate to:
- Teleological and ateleological approaches to academic learning and professional development
- Individual and institutional priorities in framing this community of academic learning
- Competitive and collaborative conceptualisation of what is 'good' academic work.

The major findings relate to:
- The direct impact on the group members' aspirations and goals of the contexts in which the group operates and the heterogeneity of the academics' ideological constructions of their learning and work
- The importance of linking those aspirations and goals to broader debates about academic work and the future sustainability of universities.

Theoretical significance of the research
The findings of the study have three significant aspects in the ongoing theorisation of academic learning and work:
- The confirmation of the direct conceptual links between identity and learning posited by Danaher (2008), Danaher, Danaher and Danaher (2008) and Musselin and Becquet (2008)

- The mediation of those conceptual links through individual academics' individual and shared intellectual biographies
- The proposition of 'the potentials for an academic learning community' as a constructed, contextualised and heterogeneous phenomenon.

Educational significance of the research

The findings of the study have two significant aspects in enhancing educational policy and practice:

- The importance of enhancing the potential of communities of learners such as the group analysed in this paper in order to maximise the academic learning of contemporary academics
- The range of opportunities within, and pressures on, higher education as a particular set of sites and types of academic learning that frame and underpin the effectiveness or otherwise of that learning.

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Abstract (100-300 words):

Postgraduate students and early career researchers are the least powerful members of universities' academic staff, yet they are crucial to the success and sustainability of those staff and the institutions where they work. It is therefore vital that postgraduates and early career researchers are enabled to develop communities of academic learning, not only to acquire the habitus of academic life but also to map and navigate new territories in knowledge generation and dissemination.

This paper explores one such community of academic learning: the Postgraduate and Early Career Researcher Group at an Australian university. The paper traces the group's emergence, its current composition, its *modus operandi*, its activities and achievements to date and some possible future directions. More broadly, the paper identifies some of the forces simultaneously fostering and restraining the group's expansion as a sustaining and sustainable community of learning.

In particular, discussion focuses on the group's functioning as a microcosm of wider possibilities and pressures in contemporary universities. On the one hand, the alignment of several individuals of diverse interests and substantial abilities with the flexibility of a 'new generation' university repositioning itself in current national discourses about higher education creates opportunities for academic learning with considerable individual and communal benefits. On the other hand, corporate managerialism and neoliberalism combine to create a context that some see as hostile to the sharing of expertise and the development of a congenial academic learning environment.

The paper draws on contemporary concepts of academic work and communities of learning to support the argument that the interplay of these potentially contradictory forces is likely to continue for the foreseeable future. While this interplay can contribute to some creative tensions, those tensions can become counterproductive unless principles and strategies of community enhancement are articulated and implemented by all stakeholders.