



iSchool Best Practices – information and proposal form

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Title of submission: Professional Identity Formation: Can there be a best practice?
Area (please check the applicable area description with an x): Curriculum X Teaching Student experience X Research Administrative management

Other (please enter the applicable keyword):

Submission abstract (max 150 words):

This paper seeks to examine existing conceptualisations of professional identity and to examine the question of whether or not, and how, its formation might be considered best practice within an interdisciplinary iSchool environment. Using the Department of Information Studies (DIS) at University College London as a case study, it exposes the complexities and challenges which lie within the application of this concept, whilst also making suggestions for how it might nonetheless be approached in practice. DIS is responsible for five programmes at Masters' level; Publishing, Digital Humanities, Information Science, Library and Information Studies and Archives and Records Management and has arguably been an iSchool since library education was first offered by UCL in 1919 [1].

Submission description (max 2,350 words):

Background - literature

A comprehensive review of existing literature on the development of professional identity in higher education was carried out by Trede, Macklin and Bridges [2]. They concluded that there was "underdevelopment of the research base for professional identity formation" and highlighted in particular the lack of an "explicit conceptualization of professional identity" [2:379]. Only one of the twenty articles they included in their study set out a definition for the term professional identity, drawing on other definitions, such as that provided by Ewan (in the context of medical education) in terms of it being a "self-image which permits feelings of personal adequacy and satisfaction in the performance of the expected role" [3:85].

Their own conclusion offered the slightly broader characterisation that professional identity development was "about being in the world" or increasingly about "being in a multiplicity of worlds or communities" [2:378]. This issue of multiplicity was also highlighted in their raising of the question "What is the connection between professional, personal and social identities?" [2:376], with their conclusion being that although the "majority of articles discussed professional, personal and social identities", they "did not make explicit connections between them, let alone [discuss] how to reconcile and integrate them" [2:376].

To add to this multiplicity, there is also discussion within the literature of academic identity, with Jensen and Jetten asserting that "there is a growing recognition that student's academic achievement is influenced by their opportunities for academic identity development" [4:1027]. In this formulation, academic and professional identity were distinguished by analysis of interviews with students, as being about "feelings of belonging in higher education" [4:1038] (academic identity) and "feelings of adequacy in understanding how to do their future jobs and the purpose of the learning" [4:1038] (professional identity). And yet, in making this distinction and focussing on professional identity, Jensen and Jetten re-established the link between the lack of (in this case, professional) identity development and "lowered academic achievement, feelings of stress and insecurity, loss of motivation and meaning, and reduced goal orientation" [4:1038] amongst students. Such discussion of professional identity clearly suggests that it is to be seen as a positive thing, the development of which should be encouraged: indeed, it was noted by Lave and Wenger that "learning involves the construction of identities" [5:53]. In a similar vein, a relationship between professional identity and employability and career readiness is also the subject of some discussion in Higher Education [6-8], particularly as the employability agenda has risen in profile alongside student fee increases and a recent institutional emphasis on student experience. An apparent link between employability and Lave and Wenger's view of learning as legitimate peripheral participation in communities of practice suggests that, in vocational subjects in particular, professional identity work is key to acquisition of community membership [5].

Context - departmental identity formation

The UCL Department of Information Studies (DIS) serves as an illustrative case study, with regards to both the idea of multiplicity within identity, and also that of a link between professional identity, in particular, and positive outcomes in terms of motivation and employability. Three of its five

postgraduate programmes (MA Archives and Records Management - ARM, MA / PgDip Library and Information Studies - LIS and MA Publishing - PUB) are very strongly tied to long-established professions or careers, whereas two are not (MSc Information Science - IS and MA/MSc Digital Humanities - DH). Of those three long-established professions, two have strong professional bodies (Archives and Records Association - ARA and Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals - CILIP) which accredit the programmes as a way into the profession and one does not (PUB). Then again CILIP also accredit the IS programme. This multiplicity in professional identities, and the differing strength and formalisation of those identities, is strikingly evident as silos within the department. Staff and students alike appear to have difficulty in coming together under what one recent Head of Department named the "Information Rainbow".

In recent years, therefore, increasing efforts have been made to inculcate a "departmental" identity amongst the whole student cohort. The initiatives here have included a student-led induction process, department-wide events during induction week and for dissertation Boot Camp, DIS Open Days and cross-programme teaching. Equally a departmental identity is being sought across academic staff, through their participation in induction, Boot Camp and the staff annual Away Day as well as cross-programme teaching.

The value and purpose of identity work around departmental identity has been discussed regularly in staff meetings and our thinking about it is constantly evolving. Initially it would be fair to say that the underlying rationale or strategy for unifying departmental identity was not clearly articulated and discussions were mainly situated around two relatively pragmatic points; the first of these being the efficient allocation of teaching staff across perceived disciplinary boundaries. This is particularly important in regard to support and assessment of cohort-wide coursework, namely the Masters' dissertation. Teaching is encouraged across programmes and students are encouraged to take or audit electives delivered outside their specialist field to enhance their self-directed identity formation. The range of dissertation topics then often requires allocation of dissertation supervision and marking across disciplines. The second issue relates to the view that an increasing number of employment opportunities are afforded to those graduates who adopt a wider view of their professional identity. Employers work in varying levels of curriculum integration with academic staff across the department, and job announcements are regularly circulated to students by academic and administrative staff. There is some anecdotal evidence to suggest that graduates may benefit from taking a generalist approach to job-hunting in order to build a path of relevant experience to a specialist "dream job" destination.

Initial efforts at fostering a departmental identity have also met with mixed results. For example, when we set up an online chatroom for new students to ask questions during Induction Week, the usernames they chose soon told us how they wanted to be identified. It is notable that these were created on the first day the students arrived, the user names they chose including; "TheCardigans", "Lonelylibrarians", "Publishers" / "Publisher" / "Publishing" and "Archivistsaresuperheroes". We also had messages such as "Where are all the other LIS students in this building? 3 of us have found one another but nobody else! :(". Perhaps, though, this should not have been very surprising. The students do not apply to join the department. Rather they have applied for the programme, they are likely to have spoken to members of the programme team at interview or Open Day, and they may have attended an Offer Holders Day for that programme. Although the Departmental Open Day starts with a DIS presentation, the students are then divided into programme cohorts for more detailed information. It is, perhaps, unsurprising that after being welcomed specifically into their programme of interest from their initial contact that they identify as members of their programme. The student feedback from this experience helped to explain this, suggesting that while the programme-specific inductions served to support the development of academic social and pre-professional identity [9], departmental induction was considered by some to be peripheral and time-consuming.

This complex agenda (student experience, employability, professional and academic identity formation, staffing, departmental mission) demonstrates a need for a holistic approach to address the arising challenges, with adoption at all levels within the department (academic, managerial and

administrative staff, taught and research students).

Discussion

A possible framework for this approach, arising in the work of Lawler [10], distinguishes between;

1. Identity as about being similar to others
2. Identity as about being different to others
3. Identity as about identification – about identifying ourselves as members of particular, in this case professional, groups.

Reflection on the above experiences, along with ongoing discussions within the department, is increasingly leading the authors to consider that, in the context of an interdisciplinary iSchool, any hope of best practice in professional identity formation should be framed by a focus on 1 and 2, and not just on 3.

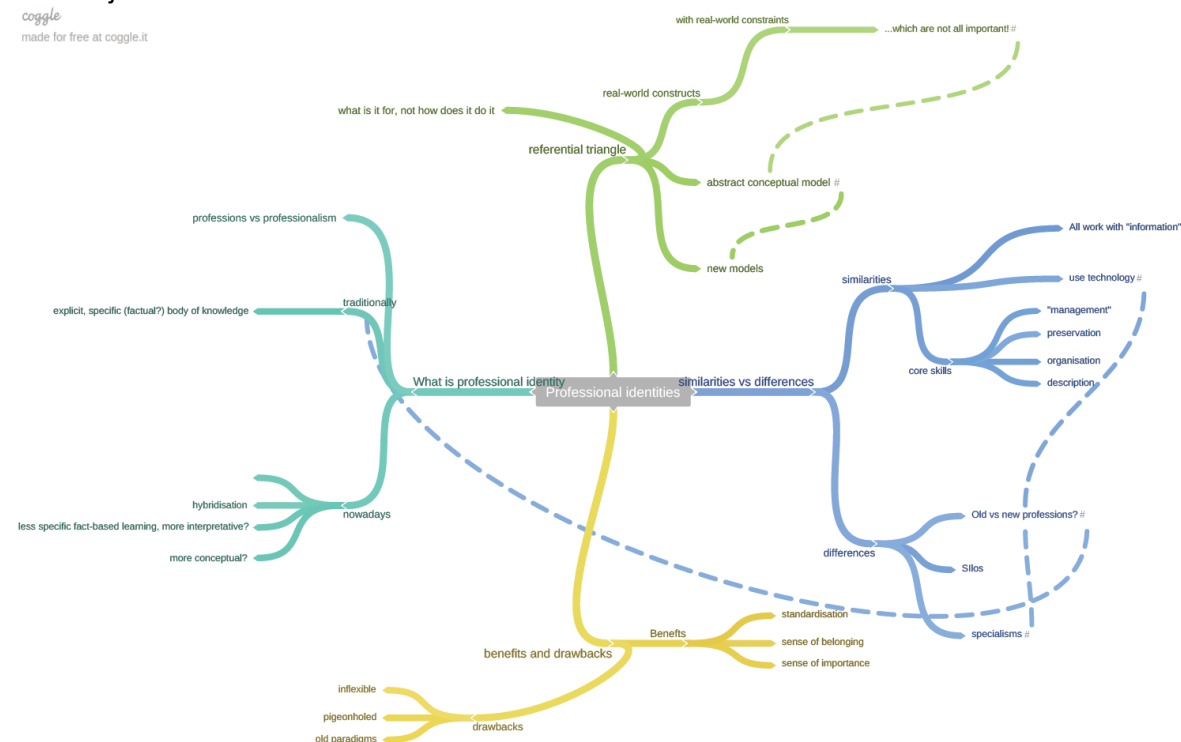


Figure 1 Professional identities

As can be seen in the mind-map (Figure 1), 3 has strong negative and positive consequences – silos and inflexible attitudes vs strong sense of belonging. The strength of this polarity suggests that ‘identification’ may undermine the values of the interdisciplinarity of an iSchool, whose strength is based on cooperation and connections. Further, identification with a specific group, such as archives and records management or librarianship may exacerbate this polarity if the particular group in question has achieved, or thinks it has achieved, the status of ‘profession’, because such groups try very hard (at a collective level) to ensure recognition and status for their own members and distinctiveness through mechanisms such as accreditation of training, ring-fencing of knowledge, registration as a gateway to practice, etc.

As a consequence of this thinking, and based on internal discussions and student feedback, we have changed our direction and have tried to move instead to events in Induction Week that are designed not to try to impose some form of unified DIS identity, but rather to surface both the differences and similarities between the programmes in terms of their perspectives. Last year, therefore, we organised a debate in the first week in which an academic staff member from each programme spoke for 10 minutes on the subject of “What is information?” and we then took questions from the audience of induction taught and research students from across the department. In this way, the students could see both the commonalities and differences for themselves and become more aware

of the multiplicity of perspectives on information within DIS.

This year we will be using this debate as an introduction to the dissertation process, as this is the one piece of work that all students complete, and is therefore a thread throughout the department. The debate will involve a discussion of possible research questions on the topic of social media, varying according to programme perspectives. Students will add their own ideas and thereby to start to explore what makes a good research question. This will be followed up halfway through the term during departmental dissertation Boot Camp, the dissertation being a required element of a taught Masters'. It is proposed that this approach will surface the differences and perspectives while connecting the discussions to a practical outcome – formation of dissertation research questions. Taking the above approach would seem to be better practice than the one we initially tried, not because an emphasis on similarities and difference (1 and 2) is always to be preferred to one on identification (3), but because it is a question of balance. Student feedback from our initial efforts at Induction Week showed strong identification amongst the incoming cohort, but less awareness of similarity and difference. In this context, then, it is this last that needs to be surfaced. In others, it may be the former. Then again, we also consider it better practice, because it does not seek to impose an identity on our students from the outside, but rather to expose them to a multiplicity of perspectives towards which they must work out how to relate in themselves.

Recommendations and Conclusions

This paper has sought to consider the question of whether or not, and how, professional identity formation might be considered best practice within an interdisciplinary iSchool environment. In so doing it has highlighted the complexities and challenges that lie within this concept, both on the theoretical level, in delineating between personal, professional, social and academic identities, and on the practical level, in dealing with pragmatic concerns such as the efficient and equitable allocation of teaching staff. It has described how UCL's Department of Information Studies has tried to articulate and rationalise a way forward through this complexity.

At present, that rationalisation draws on Lawler's framework [10] to characterise good practice in professional identity formation on behalf of academic staff, as the maintenance of an awareness of the various dimensions of identity, and the careful undertaking of interventions to keep those dimensions in balance and flux, so that none of them gain total ascendancy over all.

As a result of taking this position, the paper also suggests that one avenue which might offer a fruitful line of enquiry to elaborate current conceptualisations of professional identity formation, is to include consideration of agency. It is notable that when Jensen and Jetten distinguished between academic and professional identity, they also distinguished between "feelings of belonging" and "feelings of adequacy" [4:1038]. Then again, Ewan's definition of professional identity as "self-image which permits feelings of personal adequacy and satisfaction in the performance of the expected role" [3:85] also references adequacy. Indeed, it is perhaps not too far removed from definitions of self-efficacy as "beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations" [11:2]. In this way, professional identity surfaces that another dimension to identity is that of agency. Perhaps this is another balance that is needed, such that identity formation becomes not just about helping our students to develop a sense of self (as the same or different to others, as belonging/not belonging to certain groups), but as helping them to develop a sense of self agency in and of the wider world.

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