LEARNING TO BELONG: NAVIGATING LIMINAL SPACES BETWEEN DISCIPLINARY AND TEACHING IDENTITIES

S. Benvenuti*
Faculty of Commerce, Law, and Management
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1434-0404

A. MacGregor*
Faculty of Commerce, Law, and Management
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9453-8666

D. de Klerk*
Faculty of Commerce, Law, and Management
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8051-0833

K. Padayachee*
Faculty of Science
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7015-5962

L. Dison*
Faculty of Humanities
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1626-4954

*University of the Witwatersrand
Johannesburg, South Africa

ABSTRACT

The continuous professional learning of academics as university teachers is a national imperative in South Africa. At our university, a Postgraduate Diploma in Education (Higher Education) was introduced in 2015 with the aim to professionalise university teaching through a formal qualification. Students (i.e., candidates) must transition in two ways: firstly, from being disciplinary specialists to being students again; and secondly, into the community of scholarly teaching in higher education. This article examines the liminality experienced by candidates as they navigate the programme and learn to belong to a new scholarly teaching community. Drawing on empirical data collected from graduates and programme coordinators, the authors track candidates' shifting identities and showcase how, though initially turbulent and unsettling, the process of learning to belong to a new teaching identity can be rewarding and enriching. The authors conclude by discussing the conditions required to enable candidates to acquire a strong university-teacher identity.

Key words: belonging, higher education, identity, liminality, professional learning, threshold concepts

INTRODUCTION

It can be argued that liminality, the sense of discomfort and dissonance experienced in the shift from one identity to another, is unavoidably part of meaningful and transformative learning. When learning disrupts established disciplinary identities, the associated sense of liminality can become substantially more unsettling. Intentionally guiding and supporting students through this disruption provides a fertile environment where a sense of belonging in a new disciplinary space can be fostered.

In this article, we explore the liminal spaces traversed by academics enrolled for a professional teacher qualification in higher education. In this learning context, the students (or rather, *candidates*[1]) are non-traditional in the sense that most of them are experts in their fields or home disciplines (holding a master's or doctorate degree, and/or senior academic appointments), and now find their disciplinary and professional identities disrupted in new and often uncomfortable ways as they enter and grow through the qualification. The article highlights how interactions between and among candidates and facilitators create spaces where candidates find a sense of belonging. By supporting these candidates to become comfortable with the discomfort of being a student again, as well as sharing the learning experience with a diverse body of peers, they acquire a teacher identity and voice that gradually begins to inform their teaching practice and reshapes their academic identity.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

In South Africa, university lecturers can teach in their disciplinary area without any formal professional teacher education. The assumption underpinning this practice is that disciplinary experts automatically possess the necessary skills to mediate disciplinary knowledge and skills to students. Yet teaching is more than disseminating declarative and procedural knowledge; it is a dynamic and complex process that requires ongoing interaction, critical judgment and responsiveness (Ramsden 2003). While some university lecturers may come to realise and appreciate the nuanced and dynamic nature of teaching without a formal qualification, in many instances, teaching remains teacher centred, without a deep and meaningful understanding of educational theories and practices (Leibowitz et al. 2017, 52). This approach to university teaching has, however, begun to shift following a large, national study (2011 to 2016) involving eight South African higher education institutions (Leibowitz et al. 2017).

The Leibowitz et al. (2017) study investigated the influence of institutional context on the professional learning of academics as teachers, with one of the most influential contributions said to be the conceptual shift in discourse from *professional development* to that of

professional learning (Leibowitz et al. 2017, 11). A key recommendation from the study was that a national policy on professional learning for university teachers be written (Leibowitz et al. 2017, 15). Subsequently, the South African Department of Higher Education (DHET) published its *National Framework for Enhancing Academics as University Teachers* (DHET 2018), thus laying the groundwork for a more sustained and coordinated approach to enabling the professional learning of South African academics as university teachers.

Our institution offers a Postgraduate Diploma in Education (Higher Education) (PGDipE(HE)), which serves as a formal qualification for advancing the professional learning of university teachers to enhance undergraduate and postgraduate student success. It promotes a scholarly and reflective approach to curriculum design, teaching, learning and assessment, and encourages candidates to engage with the scholarship of teaching and learning (SOTL). Candidates complete four courses, starting year one with *Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, which is followed by *Assessment in Higher Education*. In year two, they proceed to the *Curriculum Development in Higher Education* course and end with the *New Directions* course (an elective[2]), which aims to promote SOTL research.

Candidates who enrol for the PGDipE(HE) are academic and/or professional staff, joining the programme from diverse backgrounds and disciplines (we focus on academic candidates' experiences in this article). As such, candidates enter with particular disciplinary identities (i.e., deep expertise in their home discipline) and associated dispositions towards teaching and learning. For some, teaching and learning is already a core part of their identities, with enrolment in the PGDipE(HE) seen as a way to deepen and extend their knowledge in a scholarly way. For others, teaching and learning is a more peripheral activity, and participation is more for certification or to address concerns raised about their teaching. In either case, the process of becoming a teacher involves ways of thinking and practising in one's own and other disciplines (Meyer and Land 2003). Through various interactions and integrative processes, PGDipE(HE) candidates emerge as graduates with a sense of belonging to a scholarly teaching and learning community. As such, the programme places candidates in a cross-disciplinary space in which they transition in two ways: firstly, from disciplinary specialists to being students again and secondly, into the scholarly community of teaching in higher education.

Weller (2019, 3) argues that academic identity is a "process always in action that is an outcome of our individual agency, the personal values, aims, experiences as we teach or research as it relates to the social structures of institutional, disciplinary or professional contexts". This process of reimagining disciplinary identities, "or to disidentify from a work-imposed identity in order to be what they might regard as their authentic self" (Beech 2011, 285, drawing on Costas and Flemming 2009), can be both uncomfortable and alienating for

many. Similarly, Samuel (2022, 124) provides an account of practising academics who move out into the "fear zone" "where new muscles are honed, and new inspirations actively sought". In contrast, others remain in the "zone of safety", without challenging "normative patterns of teaching and learning" (Samuel 2022, 123). We contend that a process of discomfort and alienation is evidence (and arguably a necessary part) of liminal experiences that occur as the new identity evolves (Van Gennep 1960) and as PGDipE(HE) candidates learn to belong.

BELONGING

The body of literature about belonging in higher education contexts continues to grow. Authors like Pym, Goodman, and Patsika (2011), O'Keeffe (2013), and Meehan and Howells (2019) make explicit links between helping students foster a sense of belonging at the higher education institution where they study and counteracting attrition (often referred to as drop-out in South Africa). Similarly, studies by Thomas (2016), Masika and Jones (2016), and Strayhorn (2019) highlight the positive influence acquiring feelings of belonging can have on student success. Furthermore, these studies tend to refer to belonging, both within learning contexts (Meehan and Howells 2019, 1377) and within broader university contexts (O'Keeffe 2013). However, the literature on belonging predominantly focuses on undergraduate student belonging or, in select cases (e.g., O'Keeffe 2013), belonging in relation to postgraduate student attrition. In this article, we explore the notion of belonging through a different lens. We focus on the liminality experienced by candidates enrolled for a PGDipE(HE) as their existing identities evolve to the point where they have acquired a sense of belonging to a new disciplinary space: that of the scholarly university teacher.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Liminality

Liminality, originally described by Van Gennep (1960) and subsequently expanded on by Turner (1964) and Meyer and Land (2003, 2005), is used as the underpinning conceptual framework for this study. Van Gennep's (1960) original theorisation centred on the notion of rites of passage in which a person passes from one identity state to another, transitioning through three phases in the process, viz., *separation*, *marginalisation* and *incorporation* (Van Gennep 1960, 11). The first phase, the rites of *separation*, is characterised by a conscious separation from an individual's previous role and self-identity, and an opening up to new possibilities. The second phase, *marginalisation*, is what Turner (1964) refers to as *betwixt and between*, when one is no longer defined by their old role and identity but has not yet shifted into

a new role or developed a new sense of self-identity. In contrast, the third phase – *incorporation* (Van Gennep 1960) – is where the individual integrates the new identity and (re)enters society in a newly defined role. We view this third phase as the process of acquiring a sense of *belonging* to the new disciplinary space and identity.

Figure 1 represents our adapted interpretation of how candidates may start to acquire a sense of belonging to a new disciplinary community: that of scholarly higher education teachers. Samuel (2022, 124) says that "[s]uch shifts are not simply a matter of cerebral/cognitive reconfigurations; they require deep enculturation into alternative ways of being and becoming". In this article, we endeavour to show that it is in the *betwixt and between* phase (Turner 1964) where the more pivotal shifts in identity occur.
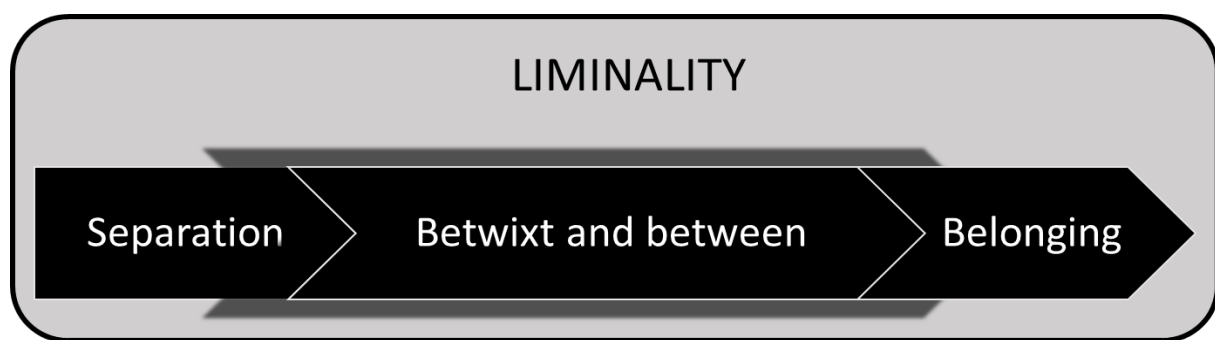

Figure 1: Visual representation of the three phases of liminality, adapted for this article from Van Gennep (1960) and Turner (1964).

Threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge

Liminality has been extensively applied in various fields to explore the conditions required for identity shifts to occur, as well as the experiences of those undergoing such shifts. Of particular interest in this article is how PGDipE(HE) candidates experience the shifts through these phases during the qualification (if at all), and how curriculum and pedagogical choices employed might have facilitated or complicated such shifts. In this respect, an important consideration is the issue of threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge (Meyer and Land 2003, 2005) in the field of higher education, and how these contribute to the liminal experiences of candidates.

Meyer and Land (2003, 2005) describe threshold concepts as "'conceptual gateways' or 'portals' that lead to a previously inaccessible, and initially perhaps 'troublesome', way of thinking about something" (Meyer and Land 2005, 373). They further explain that passing through such a portal may lead to a "new way of understanding, interpreting, or viewing something [...] a transformed internal view of subject matter, subject landscape, or even world view" (Meyer and Land 2005, 373). In this respect, threshold concepts, once mastered, may be transformative (triggering a significant shift in perspective or conceptual understanding), irreversible (unlikely to be forgotten), or integrative. In this conceptualization, liminality

includes the process or experience of crossing conceptual thresholds and grappling with troublesome knowledge.

Figure 2 extends Figure 1, showing continuous and iterative engagement with multiple threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge that form part of the liminal *betwixt and between* phase of candidates' transition. The liminal space is therefore a non-linear experience. As troublesome knowledge continues to present throughout the PGDipE(HE), candidates may move backwards before being able to move forwards again. The rough edging and iterative arrows in Figure 2 represent the turbulent and often recursive nature of navigating threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge.
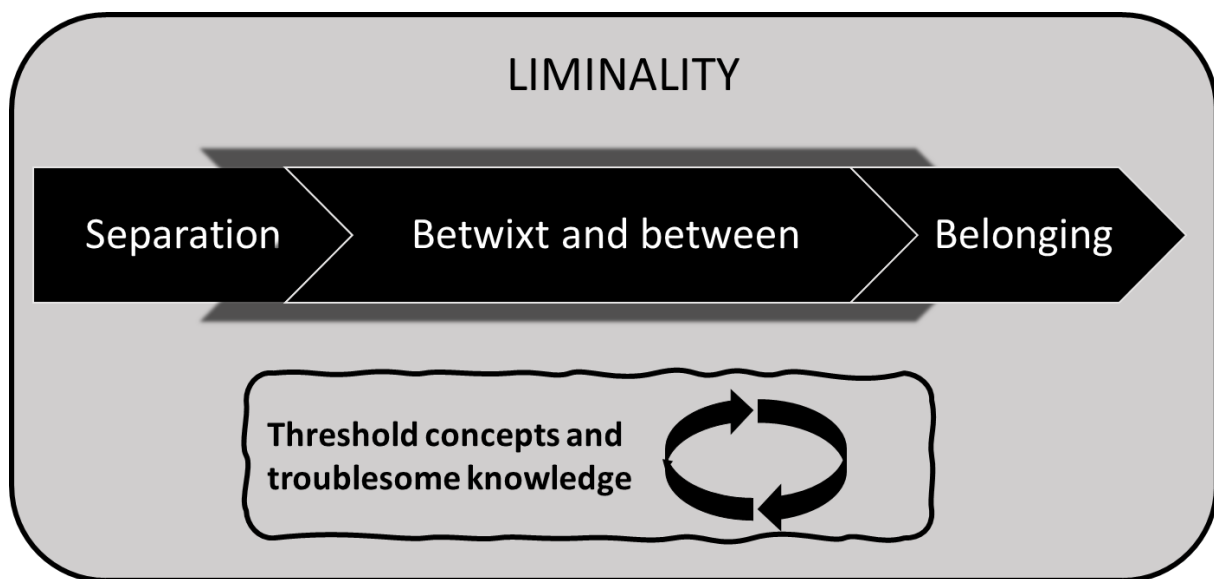

Figure 2: Visual representation of an elaborated Figure 1, incorporating the notions of threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge, as per Meyer and Land (2003; 2005).

Notably, some thresholds are not easily crossed and may pose significant challenges to further acquisition of new concepts and/or knowledge. These moments, when candidates face significant barriers to understanding content, are referred to by Sturts and Mowatt (2012) as "bottlenecks". Middendorf and Shopkow (2017, 14) also discuss bottlenecks, referring to these as "places where students get stuck", often as a result of viewing all information in the same way, and applying old mental models of knowledge acquisition to new and different forms of knowledge, as is the case for many disciplinary experts encountering education discourse for the first time. A key mechanism for addressing the discomfort and transitioning across threshold concepts and bottlenecks is reflexivity (Bassot 2013), which is a core thread that is integrated throughout the PGDipE(HE) programme.

Pedagogy of reflective practice: Reflection and reflexivity

The PGDipE(HE) foregrounds critical reflective practice as a key thread in its pedagogical

approach (see Figure 3). As an underpinning pedagogy, candidates are required to use reflection to challenge existing paradigms and to go "assumption hunting" (Brookfield 2011). The fundamental goal of instilling critical reflective practice is consciously and explicitly integrated into course pedagogy and assessment, as candidates are not always proficient at "doing reflection" and reflective practice is not cultivated or valued in some disciplinary contexts (Stierer 2008). The course pedagogies require candidates to be in touch with their emotions of discomfort or surprise, in order to describe the significance of these experiences in written and verbal modalities. This process often involves feedback from peers and facilitators through enacted processes of reflective dialogue (Brockbank and McGill 2006).
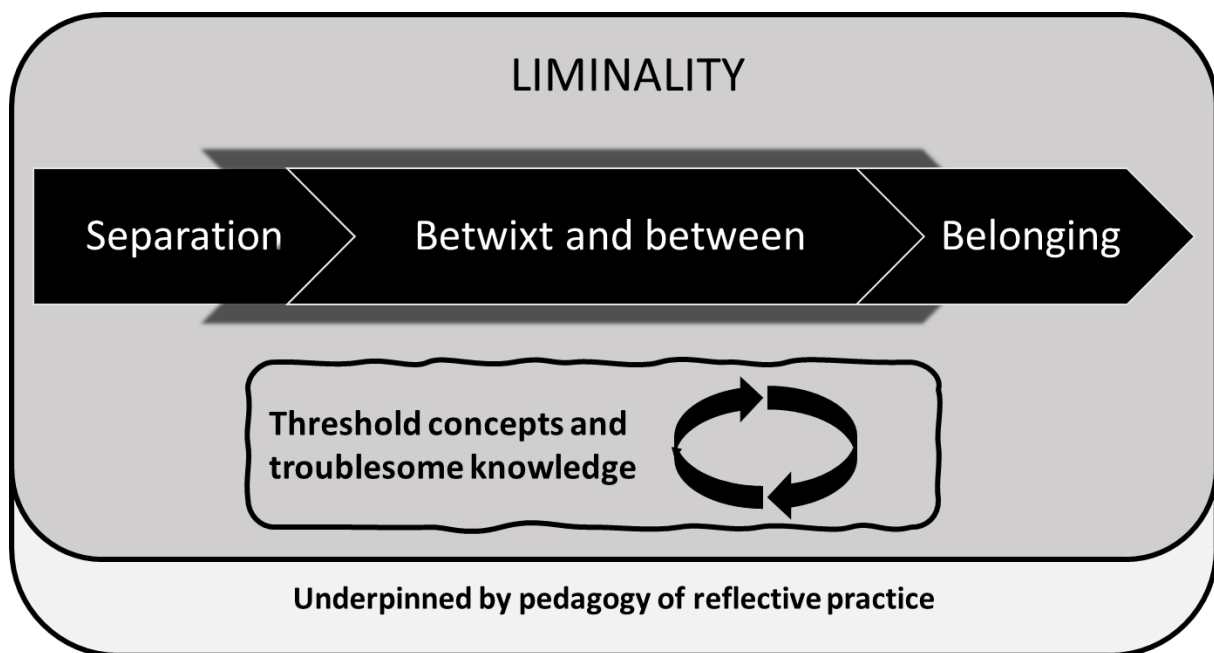

Figure 3: Visual representation of an elaborated Figure 2, demonstrating how a pedagogy of reflective practice underpins the PGDipE(HE).

A useful distinction between reflection, reflectivity and reflexivity (Bassot 2013) is unpacked for PGDipE(HE) candidates, to highlight the different purposes of reflective thinking. Reflexivity relates to a "high level of self-awareness" when candidates question their deeply held assumptions and values (Mezirow 2009). Reflexivity is often confused with reflectivity, which is a more deliberate act of evaluating an aspect of professional practice.

METHODOLOGY

Our empirical data comprised 19 respondents (referred to as R) to an online questionnaire sent to all graduates and current candidates of the PGDipE(HE), eight (8) of whom [Participants (P)] took part in subsequent focus group (FG) interviews. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and captured anonymously. We followed an iterative coding process identifying relevant

converging themes (Guest, MacQueen, and Namey 2012) relating to PGDipE(HE) alumni's experiences of the four courses comprising the qualification. The inductive analysis allowed us to identify relationships and connections between and among themes. Similar to the methods adopted by Rutherford and Pickup (2015), our themes formed the guiding framework for this article. Liminality was then identified as the conceptual framing for the interpretation of the data.

Two of the respondents to the questionnaire are authors on this chapter and interviewers in the focus groups. Their experiences and mutual transparency assisted in gaining insights into the themes identified (Probst 2016, 90). Moreover, the article is informed by reflections from the programme coordinator (PC) and a course coordinator (CC), both of whom contributed to the development of the PGDipE(HE) and teach on the programme. As co-authors on this article, their contributions afforded an insider viewpoint of relevant themes.
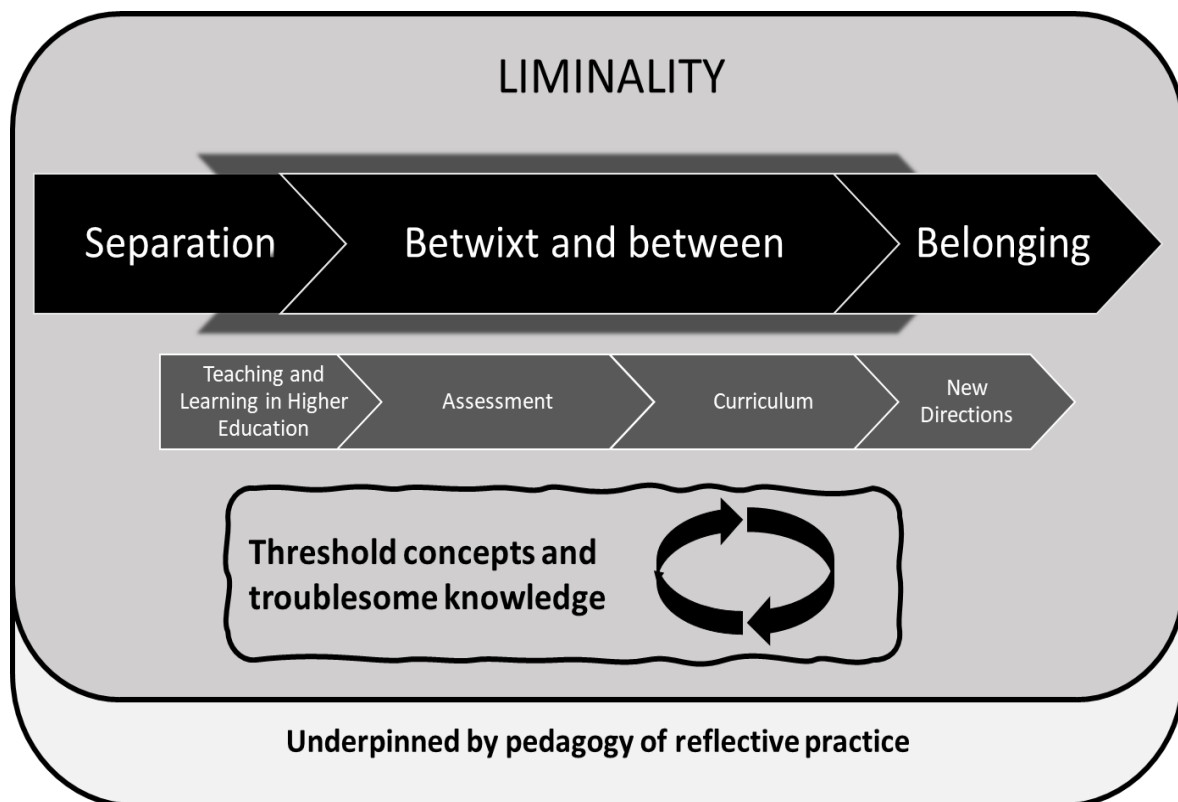
FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Figure 4: Visual representation of an elaborated Figure 3, demonstrating the PGDipE(HE) courses as the mechanism for helping candidates navigate liminal spaces.

We begin this section by graphically overlaying the four courses of the PGDipE(HE) within the three phases of liminality, as shown in Figure 4. The aim is to demonstrate how candidates' progress through the four PGDipE(HE) courses intersects with their journey through liminality.

We present our findings by focusing on each phase of liminality and consider how the

pedagogy of reflection is embedded throughout to scaffold candidates, thus helping to alleviate bottlenecks and negotiate troublesome knowledge. The importance of having reflection underpinning the entire programme is explained by the PC:

> "drawing on reflection scholars (Mezirow 1981; Schön 1987; and Ashwin et al. 2015), we have used thinking strategies, incisive questions and reading prompts to encourage candidates to reflect on and re-conceptualise their own course design, teaching and assessment practices. The criteria for writing in this genre are made explicit to candidates." (PC).

The written tasks have shown the PC how candidates have begun to think more deeply about the way in which their own courses are structured and what assumptions and values underpin their teaching practices.

> "I am struck by how participants become more confident in articulating their understanding of the threshold course concepts in relation to their teaching practices, and how they question their normative approaches to teaching and learning. To some extent, this resonates with Samuel's (2022) 'pedagogies of disruption' as participants become bolder in defending their 'positionalities and self-manag(ing) (their) own growth and developmental trajectories'." (PC).

Against this reflective backdrop, the first course of the PGDipE(HE), that of *Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, largely coincides with the period in which most candidates are experiencing *separation* (Van Gennep 1960). Here candidates are exposed to troublesome knowledge for the first time, with the reflective dimension requiring candidates to write regular reading responses that engage deeply with course texts, in relation to their own practice.

The second and third courses, *Assessment* and *Curriculum*, speak primarily to the *betwixt and between* phase (Turner 1964) of liminality. It is here that candidates are challenged to grapple with troublesome knowledge and threshold concepts (Meyer and Land 2003; 2005), and many begin to assimilate the new discourses in relation to their own teaching experiences. *Assessment* is undertaken before *Curriculum,* as the threshold concepts of the latter are considered to be more challenging than those of the former.

The *belonging* phase generally coincides with candidates undertaking the *New Directions* course. This course requires them to engage as scholarly teachers through a research project, and candidates must demonstrate the appropriate application of concepts and theories by writing a research proposal for a publishable paper on their chosen aspect of teaching and learning.

Separation

We view *separation* as a point in time where the disciplinary expert (potential PGDipE(HE) candidate) realises that their teaching practice is not at the same theoretically informed level as that of their home discipline. A decision is made to deepen their understanding of teaching, thus

opening themselves to new ways of doing (akin to what Samuel (2022) describes as moving out of the comfort zone). They enter the *separation* phase of liminality and embrace the start of the unknown. For example:

> "... it was the first class. She [the lecturer] asked the question, 'so why are you here?' and I said to her that I do not want to continue lying to my students [...] you get into class and you teach, because based on how you have been taught and the reason for me being here is that I want to understand how to teach better." (P2, FG 2)[3].

Separation often brings an acute awareness of existing identities in relation to new identities:

> **"**So, here I am, coming into higher ed and all of a sudden, I am a nobody." (P2, FG 3).

It is at this early stage of the qualification where candidates face the realisation that there is an entire knowledge field that can explain their experiences and practices of teaching and learning, which had often been largely intuitive up to that point.

> "... to add theoretical justification to my self-taught and instinctive (guesswork and trial and error!) pedagogical choices." (R7).

It also represents that moment of exiting the comfort zone, the desire to explore a new field, and the opportunity to learn new discourses. Candidates mention several reasons for choosing to professionalise their teaching practice, for example:

> "... develop the vocabulary to speak about teaching, learning and pedagogic processes." (R4).
>
> "I also really wanted to understand the theories that underpin higher education teaching and learning, so that my practice can be enhanced through this knowledge." (R11).

Given the pivotal role of motivation at this stage of the learning journey, the facilitators place significant emphasis on surfacing candidates' reflections on teaching and learning experiences. By integrating these critical reflections with facilitator-led accounts of the need for innovative, theoretically informed shifts in teaching praxis, candidates' motivation and personal investment may be bolstered, and any initial feelings of discomfort and disconnection may be normalised and supported.

Betwixt and between

Emerging from the *Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* course, candidates shift into

the *Assessment* course (see Figure 4), and may have moved beyond *separation*, but do not yet feel like they belong to the desired new identity. Candidates thus start to progress through the liminal space of *betwixt and between* (as introduced in Figure 2), yet as they encounter troublesome knowledge in the new course, they may regress before progressing again (akin to the proverbial three steps forward, two steps back).

This non-linear progression is demonstrated by one candidate who expresses frustration about the absence of a pedagogical element used in an earlier course:

> "Especially this semester, where we are not doing weekly reading responses, whereas last semester we were regularly doing them [...] I am still quoting references from last semester in this semester's courses, because I just do not have the backing to ... I have not read as deeply in this one [referring to the current course]." (P2, FG 1).

In response, the PC laments:

> "Why has that practice not developed, if it was so regularised? While candidates were required to do numerous reading responses in a previous course and comment on the usefulness [of doing that], they still do not appear to engage with readings without being prompted to do so."

This shows that time is not the only factor in making progress through the phases of liminality. Scaffolding provided by supporting pedagogies may need to be holistically applied to the programme to deal with troublesome knowledge as it emerges, and support candidates' general progression through the liminal space to the point of *belonging*.

Feelings of discomfort/dis-ease

Despite going through *separation* and thereby acknowledging the need to start anew in a novel discipline, candidates express near-tangible discomfort or dis-ease early in the *betwixt and between* phase. Samuel (2022) refers to this as moving out of the comfort zone into the zone of fear. Consider Respondent 18's observation about their transition:

> "[i]nitially, weird, uncomfortable, and many nights thinking 'what on earth am I doing?' and 'this was a bad idea but I am in it now'. Over time that changed considerably as I started to see the benefits of what was being taught to my own practice. I came to look forward to the weekly participation and I realised *this* is what I had been missing." (R18).

Boler and Zembylas (2003) (as cited by Samuel 2022, 124) note that "this fear constitutes a theoretical disquiet since new conceptual definitions are required to challenge normative behaviour". Boosting individual self-confidence is required for making this early transition

from the comfort zone. Candidates talk of readings being too theoretical, struggling to adjust, and grounding theory in their practice. Consider the following:

> "I found in those courses, that philosophy course [*Teaching and Learning*], I found it incredibly abstract [...] I really felt kind of quite angsty and angry that it had so little practical application. But funnily enough, that [...] has been my preferred course for miles." (P2, FG 1).

> "I can only speak about my own experience [...] with the *Curriculum* course. I struggled through that course at the beginning. If I think back, right, my own experience is that it was a turning point..." (R19).

Despite being aware that they were entering a new discipline and would be building new knowledge, there is a dissonance between what was expected on entering the programme, and what is experienced during it. The CC questioned whether this meant that more scaffolding was required or that this was a necessary liminal discomfort/dis-ease required to transition to the new identity.

This next candidate expresses difficulty navigating the requirements of an assessment task in the *Assessment* course:

> "[T]he puzzles for example, is a good example. Like, we have been given virtually no briefings on the puzzle whatsoever, apart from 'here is the rubric and here are two lines on what you should be doing' [...] we are guessing what the puzzle is. I mean, I am still not entirely sure what my puzzle is, and I have done two assessments on it." (P2, FG 1).

Participant 2 (FG 1) voices the sentiments expressed by many participants who struggled with grasping the notion of an assessment puzzle. As the PC explains:

> "The main assessment task in the *Assessment* course is a puzzle in which candidates are required to go through a process of an assessment issue or problem in their teaching context that needs to be resolved."

Given that several participants view the puzzle as difficult, we consider the puzzle as a potential bottleneck within the programme (Sturts and Mowatt 2012; Middendorf and Shopkow 2017). According to the PC and CC, the puzzle is a cumulative and scaffolded mechanism for explicitly bridging theory and practice. It is a cumulative assessment task with multiple submissions and opportunities for feedback. In the discussion of the instructions and rubric, the ambiguity of the puzzle assessment[4] is acknowledged, and candidates are told that it will crystalise over time. However, the candidates appear to "get stuck" on the instructions (or lack of understanding thereof) (Middendorf and Shopkow 2017). Candidates who are unfamiliar with the discourse

of assessment at the start of the course, may find the vocabulary used in the puzzle task instructions unclear or confusing. Such a bottleneck is therefore explicitly addressed and discussed throughout the *Assessment* course, with the aim of enabling participants to analyse puzzle exemplars alongside the puzzle rubric. As a result, most candidates transition past the perceived bottleneck, and a sense of *belonging* or increased comfort within the discipline of education emerges as candidates progress through the *Assessment* and *Curriculum* courses.

Learning to belong

Characteristic of the *betwixt and between* phase, we observe candidates becoming more comfortable with the discomfort/dis-ease as they progress through the PGDipE(HE). For example:

> "If I had to single out key things, I would say that the PGDipE(HE) gave me confidence, a vocabulary and library of important ideas and concepts and perspectives from different disciplines." (R14).

> "It was a generative experience and learning path. I think the content was excellent. I learned a lot about myself, my writing and thinking around teaching, learning and assessment." (R6).

The point at which candidates become comfortable occurs differently for everyone. This generally happens somewhere between the start of the *Assessment* course and the end of the *Curriculum* course (see Figure 4) (although not for all candidates). Several candidates identified the *Assessment* course as being a turning point or favourite course, as illustrated below:

> "... when we did the *Assessment* module in semester two of my first year, it was wonderful. I felt vindicated and inspired to continue critically viewing assessment ...." (R1).

> "I was excited that, actually, assessment was a field in educational studies. I had no idea about it [...] for me that was the excitement, that it offered me the language and the tools to think about my marking, to think about my assessment tasks and so on." (P3, FG 2).

For others, the shift towards *belonging* to a new identity took longer and only started to occur (or became more pronounced) during the *Curriculum* course:

> "I think that was very powerful [...] thinking about transformation, decolonisation in the university [...] that *Curriculum* course really solidified how I was approaching it [teaching], in such a way that I could now teach a course that I believe that I should not be teaching at all." (P 1, FG 1).

> "The *Curriculum* course was definitely a pivot for me though, as it was towards the end of this course that I started feeling like a knower and began feeling really comfortable in the teaching and learning space." (R19).

A noteworthy observation is how candidates from diverse disciplinary backgrounds may experience the same course differently. One candidate perceived the *Curriculum* course to be:

> "... incredibly well tailored for that practical element. It was not theoretical, and we were always going back to our practice ...." (P1, FG 1).

Conversely, another candidate observes that:

> "... with *Curriculum*, what excited me about it, was its theoretical depth [...] *Curriculum* showed me that there was something that was called the sociology of education [...] for me it was exciting, because it went deep into the theories of curriculum ...." (P3, FG 2).

The above demonstrates the influence of disciplinary backgrounds on candidates' experience of liminality in the programme. This poses challenges for the course facilitators in terms of pedagogic choices to meet candidates' varying learning needs. These needs are partly met through engagements among candidates, their peers, and the facilitators, all of whom support their learning. Ultimately, it is through these shared engagements that a sense of *belonging* to a new disciplinary community first emerges for most candidates.

Networks of Learning

Turner (1969) identifies the importance of community in the transitions through liminality. In the context of the PGDipE(HE), we term this engagement *Networks of Learning*. Several candidates reference their peers as being important to learning and progress through the liminal space:

> "I really enjoyed the community of practice. I was exposed to thinking and experiences from different disciplines that really changed my perspective on many things." (R14).
>
> "... it was wonderful to meet like-minded colleagues in other faculties. I felt understood." (R1).
>
> "Learning a lot from the colleagues through shared experiences ...." (R17).

Interaction and engagement with the facilitators, together with how they modelled the reflective pedagogy in the course, was also viewed as an important learning network:

> "... just engaging with these individuals [the facilitators] has also enlightened the way I teach. So, picking up from their practice, also informed my practice [...] the way the facilitators engaged with us during those sessions. For me that has left an imprint, a good one." (P 2, FG 2).
>
> "... afterwards the brilliance for me of how they [the facilitators] scaffolded us, how the course is designed for me [...] that was really good planning and teaching [...] put into practise." (R19).

These quotes also show that candidates have started to appreciate the discourse and the pedagogic reasoning, which they were able to identify within the practices of the facilitators. This could be taken as an indication of candidates approaching the phase of *belonging*.

Belonging

We view the final phase of liminality, that of *incorporation* (Van Gennep 1960), as the process of *belonging*. Samuel's (2022, 124–125) growth zone is pertinent for understanding how candidates move "beyond pedagogical performativity discourses" (Samuel 2022, 125) to feeling adequately empowered to make changes in their own pedagogies. This is evident as the journey through the PGDipE(HE) gave participants confidence to reflect critically on their teaching:

> "... the PGDipE(HE) certainly gave me that confidence to say: 'hey man, you are not a nobody, you are actually coming here with a lot'." (P 2, FG 3).

> "... my confidence in the role has enabled me to tackle things that I might otherwise have been overwhelmed by. The course that I described [...] was actually a particularly challenging course in terms of the politically charged nature of the content and my positionality as a white lecturer. As someone who struggles with conflict, I was anticipating and dreading pushback from students, which did in fact happen. However, I approached the course by focusing on the pedagogic elements, where the *Curriculum* course was particularly useful, and ultimately was able to deal emotionally with the pushback because I was confident in my pedagogical role ...." (R6).

What emerges from the data is that the PGDipE(HE) gave candidates a sense of *belonging* to a new disciplinary space, with some embracing their newfound identity by conducting SOTL research:

> "Almost all my research is now in the field of teaching and learning; I think about what and how I teach, how students learn, what enhances learning, how I design curriculum and have reworked much of my courses, the activities and the whole programme [...] I discuss the course and what I learnt all the time with my fellow staff members; I am writing papers with my writing fellows; I represent the faculty at the institutional writing board; I attend all [...] conferences; I speak at international conferences on teaching and learning." (R4).

Evidently, some candidates have embraced their newfound theoretical knowledge. Samuel (2022, 124) explains that "[i]t is when individuals draw on adequate syntaxes from alternative discourses that they can escape the fear zone to enter into a 'learning zone'". The knowledge learned is now a comfortable part of who the candidates are and is no longer considered as troublesome. This assimilation of new knowledge allows candidates to move into the "growth

zone" (Samuel 2022), as this knowledge becomes incorporated into their scholarly way of being.

> "I now think before I act, it has informed my academic decision making." (R2).
>
> "I now see teaching and learning as a process and not a destination. I constantly reflect and make changes to my teaching content, delivery and assessment. I am now aware of my teaching philosophy, strengths and weaknesses." (R6).

For some, doing the PGDipE(HE) was a transformative endeavour and for this particular candidate, even irreversible, as they wholly integrate their teaching identity with their disciplinary self (Meyer and Land 2005):

> "I have changed the way that I think about teaching completely. The PGDipE(HE) influences my interactions in meetings when discussing important issues and decisions, it influences the design of every module that I teach, of every assessment that I set and of how I see and try to influence the curriculum as a whole. It influences the research that I want to do and the conversations that I have." (R14).

Reflective Pedagogy

As mentioned earlier, a reflective pedagogy underpins the PGDipE(HE) (see Figure 3) and was modelled by the facilitators throughout all four courses. Candidates acknowledged the benefit of being aware of adopting a reflective practice, both while doing the PGDipE(HE) and towards their own teaching practice:

> "I think that was the greatest value of the PGDipE(HE) [...] the introspection that it provided, and it helped us to kind of figure out [...] why we are still doing what we are doing." (P1, FG 3).
>
> "... for me, currently, the *Assessment* course has been a huge thing of actually really reflecting and it has made me reflect on my own teaching ...." (P3, FG 3).
>
> "I loved the learning the PGDipE(HE) allowed, and how reflective it forced me to become on my own practice. It was a humbling experience to realise my teaching and engagement with my students needed much improvement." (R18).

It is the pedagogy of continuous and ongoing individual and collective reflection that supports candidates as they move through the *betwixt and between* phase and begin to acquire a sense of *belonging*. Candidates demonstrate a reflectivity in their practice as they start to develop and reconsider their teaching approaches. In this respect, we argue that reflectivity is a key condition for transitioning liminal moments in the programme. Through their theoretically informed and critical reflections on practice, candidates demonstrate an awareness of broader teaching and learning conversations, and a willingness to engage in SOTL research, thus signalling an emerging sense of *belonging*.

CONCLUSION

In this article we foreground the liminal experiences of academics registered for a PGDipE(HE) as they transition from disciplinary experts to a broader identity encompassing scholarly teaching. We consider how PGDipE(HE) candidates navigate this journey through the three phases of liminality, beginning with a *separation* from the familiar identity of disciplinary expert to one of a "beginner's mind", as they engage with the education discourse. Individuals do not belong immediately and must traverse the uncomfortable phase of *betwixt and between*, grappling with troublesome knowledge and threshold concepts, and manoeuvring through bottlenecks and other challenges along the journey to becoming a professional teacher of their discipline. Such movement can be viewed as the candidates' progression out of their comfort zone (*separation*), through the turbulent fear and learning zone (*betwixt and between*) and emerging with a growing sense of *belonging* within the growth zone (Samuel 2022; Van Gennep 1960).

In this transformative journey, the pedagogy of reflection serves as a unifying and continuous thread that assists candidates in their (often non-linear) movement through *betwixt and between*, thus allowing transformative shifts to occur. Some embrace this transformation and will continue to embrace and nurture their new teaching identities, whilst others will not. Others still may not move out of the *betwixt and between* phase and remain stuck within that liminal space, not yet able to move into *belonging* (Beech 2011, 287). In either case, we argue that there is growth of the teacher identity as an integral part of one's academic identity, enabled by the PGDipE(HE).

Important to note, is that we view this transformative journey as the mere start of a longer journey towards a greater sense of *belonging* as candidates' newfound identities continue to evolve. For many, the PGDipE(HE) opens possibilities for joining a new academic tribe (Becher 1994). However, developing a new identity and sense of *belonging* may also pose challenges when participants re-enter their disciplinary spaces, where others have not undergone similar transitions. It is there that a feeling of dissonance and "unbelonging" with the "old tribe" may emerge, resulting in another cycle of liminality (*separation*, *betwixt and between,* and *belonging*). Further research could explore these identity shifts and challenges more closely.

We have also illustrated how this article can be used to feedback into the review of professional learning programmes. As a consequence of our careful analysis of candidates' reflections on the lasting impact of the PGDipE(HE) on their learning, we recognise that what is needed is a more rigorous theoretical analysis of the affordances and constraints of higher education qualifications in this context. The findings of our empirical study build on the

Leibowitz et al. (2017) study discussed at the start of this article. They too demonstrate the difficulty of reconciling a new professional teacher identity with an existing one.

The purpose of higher education is to enable success for students by helping them find a sense of belonging within the institution, and within their chosen field of study. We argue that it is equally important to look at the academics who teach students, as their sense of belonging to a scholarly teacher space, can affect how they teach and by extension, student success. Consequently, we believe that this article is uniquely placed in showcasing how the programme and course facilitators enhance the reflexivity of academics and build on the ideas of others. A university teacher with a sense of identification with their role as an educator, is comfortable questioning and transforming their teaching practice through reflexivity, and in turn, will employ those very relevant skills to enrich the student experience and students' sense of belonging.

DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

NOTES

1. Throughout this article students enrolled for the PGDipE(HE) are referred to as candidates as opposed to students, as is often the case for postgraduate students.

2. Although there is another elective (*Postgraduate Supervision)*, it is not the focus in this article. This other elective is typically taken by less than 20 per cent of any given cohort.

3. We refer to participants as those candidates who took part in the focus groups [FG]. We conducted three focus groups: FG1, FG2, and FG3. We refer to respondents [R] as those candidates who took part in the online questionnaire.

4. Adapted from an assessment document from an Applied English Language Studies course at the institution where the authors work.

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