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LEARNING ACADEMIC WORK PRACTICES IN DISCIPLINE, DEPARTMENT AND UNIVERSITY

Miriam Zukas[1] and Janice Malcolm[2]

[1]Birkbeck, University of London

[2]University of Kent

ABSTRACT

Purpose

This paper examines the everyday practices of academic work in social science in order to understand better academics' learning. It also asks how academic work is enacted in relation to the discipline, department and university, taking temporality as its starting point.

Approach

The study sought to trace academic activities in practice. Within three universities, fourteen academics were work-shadowed; social, material, technological, pedagogic and symbolic actors were observed and where possible connections and interactions were traced (including beyond the institution). This paper reports on a sub-set of the study: the academic practices of four early-career academics in one discipline are analysed.

Findings

Email emerges as a core academic practice and an important pedagogic actor for early career academics in relation to the department and university. Much academic work is 'work about the work', both in and outside official work time. Other pedagogic actors include conferences, networks and external web identities. Disciplinary work happens outside official work time for the most part and requires time to be available. Disciplinary learning is therefore only afforded to some, resulting in structural disadvantage.

Value

By tracing non-human as well as human actors, it has emerged that the department and university, rather than the discipline, are most important in composing everyday work practices. A sociomaterial approach enables researchers to better understand the 'black box' of everyday academic practice. Such an approach holds the promise of better support for academics in negotiating the demands of discipline, department and university without overwork and systemic exploitation.

RESEARCHING LEARNING AND ACADEMIC WORK PRACTICES

We are interested in understanding academics' learning better through the study of their everyday practices. We are concerned about these issues not only as researchers but also in the context of our 'day jobs' as social scientists, educators and managers of academics and entities within UK universities.

Whilst some researchers have begun to explore academics' (and doctoral candidates') workplace learning, definitions of learning diverge quite radically. Some view learning as a kind of growth or change in knowledge. For example, Neumann's (2009) study of newly tenured professors' scholarly learning defines learning as "the construction of knowledge, scholarly and otherwise, that a person experiences through mental processes that involve realization, surprising juxtapositions of thought, contextualization of ideas within other ideas or building bridges between them, and so on." (p. 6) Another example (from this journal) is Pataraia *et al.*'s (2014) study of academics' learning connections where: "learning is conceived as the acquisition of new ideas, knowledge, skills, and dispositions related to teaching practice, assuming that this is likely to occur through social interactions with other knowledgeable peers." In both cases, learning is principally an individualized and internal cognitive process which might involve other actors (people, tools, technologies even) but these, together with issues such as work organisation, power and wider social and institutional structures, reside outside the learning process.

Other researchers of academics' learning emphasise practice as the basis for learning, taking a situated or sociocultural perspective. Although many different versions of these socially derived understandings exist (e.g. Hager *et al.*, 2012), these researchers draw primarily upon the idea of 'communities of practice' (Lave and Wenger, 1991) and/or social practice theory (e.g. Bourdieu, 1990). Jawitz's (2009) work on academics learning to assess exemplifies such an approach, deploying both the idea of learning as participation in legitimate peripheral practices under the guidance of experienced practitioners, and the notions of habitus, capital and field from Bourdieu. In drawing upon these concepts, Jawitz addresses the relationship between what an individual brings to the field (community of practice) as habitus, and what forms capital takes in the field. Learning is therefore understood as a form of 'becoming' in which knowledge, values and skills are enmeshed with practice.

As helpful as these forays into academics' learning are, the non-human, the technical and the material tend to be in the background (context) while the human, the social and the cultural are regarded as foundational. In common with a number of researchers investigating professional learning (e.g. Fenwick and Nerland, 2014), we believe that this produces incomplete accounts of learning in the workplace. Instead, we take a sociomaterial approach: this means first that we do not privilege the cognitive or the human, but instead investigate both material and social forces in order to understand how learning and other

everyday activities are brought about. A second common feature which we share with other sociomaterialist researchers is our assumption that:

> 'all things – human and non-human, hybrids and parts, knowledge and systems – are … effects. They are performed into existence in webs of relations. Materials are enacted, not inert; they are matter and they matter. They *act*, together with other types of things and forces, to exclude, invite and regulate activity'. (Fenwick and Nerland, 2014, p 3; italics in the original) [1]

Our earlier research on academic work sensitised us to the importance of materiality: we found that policy discourses on academic work (what we called the 'official' story) bear little resemblance to the messy experience of academic work (Malcolm and Zukas, 2009). We also showed how managerial tools, such as workload allocation forms, fragment academic experience and reclassify relations between disciplines and their manifestations in academic practice, bringing the 'official' story into being. This raised two important questions: what then are the everyday practices of academic work in the disciplinary, departmental and university workplaces? And how is learning enacted through everyday practices in these workplaces?

Academics have not generally researched academic life, let alone their own workplace learning: as Wisniewski (2000) observed, critiquing the 'collective averted gaze' of qualitative researchers from their own academic cultures and workplaces, and calling for 'ethnographic studies of professors, administrators, trustees and students'. Whilst excellent ethnographic studies of higher education exist, they tend to focus primarily on universities (e.g. Tuchman, 2009), students (e.g. Nespor 1994; Mertz, 2007) or doctoral candidates seeking academic careers (e.g. McAlpine *et al.*, 2013).

Among major studies of academics and academic work, including Becher and Trowler (2001), the international Changing Academic Profession study (RIHE, 2008); and Henkel (2000), most have been understandably human-centric in their methods: they have relied on surveys and interviews as their main source of data. There is one exception: the well-developed field of science and technology studies (STS), which emerged from earlier ethnographic studies of scientists and scientific work (Latour and Woolgar, 1979; Knorr-Cetina, 1999). As Musselin (2008) observes, most of these studies focus on research activities and only a few on teaching, yet 'the way by which academics manage the interplay between these two main groups of tasks [research and teaching], as well as the activities linked to self-governance and collective service, is barely questioned or studied' (p. 48). An antidote to this limitation would be to consider academic work holistically - that is, to research work practices as they happen rather than as described in 'official' stories. In other words, to attend to work itself - the 'black box' practices of academic work – rather than the pre-labelled categories of service, teaching or research.

Therefore, we do not conceive of academic work as a fixed repertoire of practices, but instead work from a number of generative premises: first, that academic practice is always

in the making, or emergent: 'academic activities are enacted in practice rather than already predetermined beforehand' (Decuypere and Simons, 2014, p. 102); second, that disciplinary practice, too, is always emergent and cannot be separated from academic practice; third, that the academic workplace is distributed – i.e. the daily business operates at and between the discipline, the meso-(departmental) level and the macro-(university) level. In accordance with our sociomaterial approach, we seek to understand how individual academics are *enacted* – that is, how they are brought into being through academic practice.

The daily business is complex: how does one understand what academics actually work at all day, particularly since many seem to work as much away from 'work' as at their workplace desk? Time itself has become a focus for those studying academics. Ylijoki and Mäntylä (2003), for example, identified four common time perspectives in academics' discourse about work: scheduled time, timeless time, personal time and contracted time. *Scheduled time* discourse describes 'externally imposed and controlled timetables, such as project deadlines, lecturing hours and administrative meetings.' (p. 60). *Timeless time* discourse 'involves transcending time and one's self and becoming entirely immersed in the task at hand' (p. 62). Within academics' discourse, long working hours in *scheduled time* arise because of external requirements; in *timeless time*, they are seen to arise from the individual academic's absorption with the work, usually associated with research. *Personal time* discourse refers to 'how to use your lifetime, how to combine work and other areas of life such as family, and ultimately, how to live a good life.' (p. 67), whilst *contracted time* refers to a sense of the end of 'the present contract … and a worry about the future …' (p. 65).

Scholars studying time in academic work-lives increasingly link audit cultures, quantification of scholarship, and institutional change with the acceleration of academic life (e.g. Smith, 2015; Vostal, 2015; Ylijoki, 2013). As in studies of other professionals (e.g. Mazmanian et al., 2013), some suggest academics are complicit in the reproduction of such practices, not only as managers and quantifiers, but also through their own work practices. Gornall and Salisbury (2012), for example, use the term 'hyperprofessionality' to describe 'the alignment between the professional, the always-connected modality of a continuous electronic environment and research with academics in their important but unseen work … The term is an attempt to capture elements of 'giving more', 'going beyond and above' in the professional context' (p. 150). Vostal (2015) claims there are 'positive attributes of enabling acceleration as integral components of academic lifeworld.' (p. 71); however, no-one underestimates the anxiety, guilt and overwork this acceleration engenders.

METHODOLOGY AND ANALYTICAL APPROACH

The study focused on 3 case universities, (Northside, Southside and Cityside). Data-gathering involved work-shadowing 14 individual academics, observation (e.g. of meetings; teaching and research activities; technological, collegial and social interaction; ethos,

departmental 'stories'), recording of both audio and visual data (e.g. meetings, tutorials, artefacts, maps, screenshots), collection of institutional documents/textual objects (e.g. workload allocation models, minutes, staff policies), and finally, interviews. Our primary methodological orientation was that academic activities are enacted in practice, and tracing practice was therefore the focus. The categories of analysis emerged from what Latour calls 'following the actors', i.e. observing what is present in a situation and what work it is doing. We sought to identify the actors and practices (social, material, technological, pedagogic, symbolic) observed in each setting, and trace their connections and interactions – including those extending beyond the institution through disciplinary networks, organisations and media. So tools and artefacts might be significant actors, and actors might be physical, human, textual, virtual, etc.

Throughout the study we sought to avoid becoming locked into an individualised account of a single person's working life; instead, the individual 'case' was the way into the broader data on the nature of academic work, enabling us to trace how academic work is enacted *in moments of practice* (rather than, as is more common in studies of academic work, recalled in moments of reflection such as interviews). The observer role, though neither neutral nor invisible, enabled us to identify multiple actors at work in a situation which might not be immediately apparent to the participants, and to attend to the effecting of academic work by all of the actors involved. Anonymised case narratives were generated around each person observed, utilising a form of emplotment balancing the work of the individual, the tools and technologies they used/were used by, department, discipline, networks, the university and other people, in a constructed story of complex sociomaterial practice. The grouping of individual case narratives by institution and by discipline then produced a rich account of the quotidian, practical enactment of the work of the university, the department and the discipline. Analytically, we understand these three - the university, department and discipline - to be (sometimes competing) 'workplaces'.

The strand of analysis we report on here attended closely to the negotiation, mapping and consumption of academics' time (and that of their colleagues, students, significant others), to explore how particular forms and standards of professional practice are enabled or constrained. Analysis of the organisation of intellectual, technological, social and physical space (for individuals, work-groups and departments) is ongoing and, inevitably, enmeshed with the temporal analysis. Notable divergences have emerged in terms of gender, career stage, subject specialisms and the scholarly status of each department; for the purposes of this paper, we focus on a small group of early-career academics working in the same discipline across the three universities.

FINDINGS

Here we utilise work-shadowing and observational data on four academics, all early in their careers, albeit with differing lengths of experience. Although the three institutions in which

they work are quite different, the departmental work practices are unexceptional and many are to be found in other social science departments in British universities. By investigating these work practices in detail, we can trace how the 'workplaces' of discipline, department and institution interact and sometimes compete.

So how, why and when does academic work get done, and how have these practices been learned? What networks of relationships contribute to developing, sustaining and changing these working practices? And how do academics learn to negotiate the connections and conflicts between the workplaces of department, institution and discipline?

Although the four individuals are the starting point for our case studies, their subjective careers are not our principal focus. Nevertheless some brief background will help to contextualise what their workplaces (department and institution) afford them for learning, and their different disciplinary networks and relationships. Two (Reuben and Cathy) were from the same department in Southside, the third (Adam) worked in Cityside, and Alan in Northside. Although they share a disciplinary allegiance, each of their departments goes by a different name. Reuben had been in post for five years, having been appointed whilst he was completing his PhD. Cathy joined Southside ten years ago, following a period as a post-doc in another country. Adam had been working as a lecturer for two years, after an extended period as a post-doc in another university. Alan was working as a post-doc and desperately trying to find an established academic post.

Reuben lived alone, whilst Alan, Adam and Cathy had long-standing partners, and Cathy had young children. Alan, Reuben and Cathy lived in the same cities where they worked, whilst Adam had a considerable commute. All worked at home as well as 'at work', and all spoke eloquently of the struggle to maintain (fluid) boundaries between home life and work (see Ylijoki, 2013). Adam worked on trains during his commute; Cathy worked in the evenings after the children went to bed. Alan tried to do most of his research whilst in the university, to free up time at evenings and weekends for his time-consuming job-hunt. Reuben divided his year into two – non-teaching months when he was able to fit his work into a working day, and term-time, when he had to work each evening. The constitution of this work is discussed in the next section.

Learning Academic Work Practices - Email and Other 'Humandigital' Practices

Academic work practices are constituted every day in digital technologies. Decuypere and Simons (2014) argue that academic work is not the result (output) derived from particular processes (input), but that "academic activity is being composed on a daily basis and …digital devices play a role in that composition" (pp. 89-90).

Reuben is a fairly extreme example of how digital devices can dissolve the boundaries between scheduled time and personal time. He spends 2-3 hours every night working through emails to empty his inbox before he goes to bed, and then clears it again in the morning before starting 'work'. He attributes this '*insane*' activity to his own obsessive-

compulsive tendencies, experiencing it as a subjective compulsion to manage his 'scheduled' time efficiently and productively. We might ask why he has enough email to occupy hours each night; but Reuben has now learned that this activity is not merely ground-clearing for 'real' academic work:

> *"… for a long time I really wished email could be uninvented and I just hate it. But now I've come to the conclusion that it's just work; email is just work; it's where your work gets done, so before, you'd go and sit in a room and you'd talk about something or people would phone each other … but really now, what takes time with email is not often writing the email, it's thinking. So if someone emails me about a research project … it's not writing the email that takes the time, it's thinking about the question they've asked."*

From a sociomaterial perspective, the daily practice of reading, writing and answering emails is work in the making – work is not what is achieved when an email is answered, but is emergent in the practice of answering emails. Thus, when we observe (as we did) academics spending many hours on email, we are witnessing work – often what we call 'work about the work' (such as 'keeping warm' student admission emails, emotional labour with colleagues and students, queries about official document formatting, etc.); we are party to the web of relations – human and non-human – in which the academic is located. Email can thus be seen as a boundary actor (Decuypere and Simons, 2014; Bowker and Star, 1999) at the border of multiple regions (preparing, student processing, communicating) with different operational effects (adding value to students, organising activities, creating authorship).

Online communication, it is often claimed, imposes tacit obligations to be always available and responsive, but this is not inevitable. Institutions may try to specify when and how emails are dealt with: Southside had imposed a rule on its own senior managers forbidding emails between 'close of business' on Friday and 9.00a.m. on Monday, ostensibly to ensure that work was only enacted during the week; but this rule had not impinged on the institutional expectations of academics. Universities' concerns about student recruitment and the perceived need for rapid responses to applicants mean that admissions staff (academic and administrative) learn quickly to work unbounded by the notional opening and closing of "business". Cathy experienced this in her role as admissions officer, though again attributed it in part to her own personality:

> *"If an applicant emailed, the quicker you replied, the greater the impression. [At] Southside we have to work hard to get our students to come to us, so you replied because it's a good impression … is it just my own personality being conscientious? … it's like a sales thing, if somebody emails asking a question about qualifications or something like that, will I*

need to reply because that will give a good impression and they'll think highly of the university and they'll put us as their No. 1?"

Responding to email is a means to an institutional end, but managed by individuals in their own time, generating an overwhelming sense of responsibility (and its concomitant, guilt – see Vostal, 2015) for the success or otherwise *of the university*. Admissions work, traditionally a gatekeeping role for the department and discipline, is transformed through email practices to an institutional marketing and PR role, and academics thus learn that institutional impression management is a crucial part of academic work; Adam regularly checks admissions records and sends emails to new applicants which enact 'warm' institutional relations:

'Welcome to Cityside, we've accepted you, you're now being processed."

However email also enables students to enact particular (service) relations with academics. Institutions may try to intervene in minor ways to manage "student expectations", for example through protocols for response times to emails, but individual academics are left to manage 'work about the work' for themselves:

"One thing I have found increasingly is the student will email you at the weekend and they expect an immediate answer. … you might come in on Monday and the student says, 'You didn't reply to my email'." (Cathy)

Email is only one way in which academics and students relate to each other. Moodle groups, Facebook, Twitter and other 'one-to-many' communication systems afford multiple channels for doing work, but contradictions arise across technologies and between the institution and department. Cathy, for example, could use the university's virtual learning environment (VLE) to respond to queries so that she only needs to answer a question once, but this would mean refusing to answer programme-related emails from students – which would be in breach of the university's own rules on responses to emails. These divergences between institutional protocols and departmental and/or individual practice have now become more problematic in the UK under new consumer laws (CMA, 2015).

Academics recognise the contradictions between their apparent freedom to choose academic work practices, and the explicit demands of the institution to work in particular ways, although these tend to be difficult to resist. Institutional demands are not necessarily direct instructions, but rather effect work through forms, templates, performance measures (e.g. response time to enquiries) in the name of 'quality assurance' or 'standardisation'. Cathy's classic tale, below, will be recognised by many (British) academics, but also highlights how learning 'work about the work' comes about:

"We have a (quality) review coming … so there's lots of 'we need to standardise, we need to get ourselves sorted for that'. There was a very prescriptive template [for module outlines] that we were asked to use

because the students were complaining that there were discrepancies in the information that they were getting from colleagues. Our [director of studies] and the head of department [said] 'We need to standardise this a bit more'. I never had any problems with my module outlines…. But you get an admin person coming back to you going, 'Cathy, you've done this wrong, you need to put your thing in a box so that all students know that they'll go to the assignments table and they'll find all the details.'" (Cathy)

Emails constitute departmental as well as institutional and disciplinary work. They enact departmental culture and new colleagues quickly learn what it means to be an academic in a specific department through the torrent of requests, instructions, responses, information and other exchanges arriving on email. They can become the principal form of communication between colleagues, even when they are in close physical proximity:

"Yes, it's all in the email. It's funny, even people who are on the same corridor, we email instead of going to see each other … you think to yourself, I should probably just go and see that person, but…" (Alan)

In addition to this loss of direct human contact, the email 'paper-trail' can often make work more time-consuming and burdensome:

"…something you can sort out in 15 seconds in a conversation, it takes 10 emails and lasts over an hour." (Reuben)

Email writing and (speed of) responding with respect to one administrative area or another *is* what it means to hold a departmental responsibility. The pressure to respond is experienced subjectively, but is never extricable from the network of relations and expectations of the department; nor from the departmental labour and power relations entailed in these responsibilities. For example, administrative responsibilities about a 'technical' matter such as admissions may entail considerable emotional labour, and even abuse, flowing through evenings and weekends and through personal spaces and relationships, when email 'work about the work' is unregulated. Cathy recounted an episode when she clashed with a colleague over a minor issue:

"…this was all at night and our emails were crossing over. I was trying to calm him down but he was getting more and more [agitated] … My husband was screaming at me, 'What are you doing? Just leave it' and I was 'I just need to calm him down now' and he's like 'That's not your job!'"

Cathy's husband felt that calming down an angry colleague was not her job; but within that departmental culture, this was work that academics were expected to undertake whenever necessary, even if this played out over the weekend. Unlike students, colleagues could not be put on hold.

After five years of trying to clear his inbox each day, Reuben finally tried to intervene in this 'always-on' culture, and assuage his own discomfort (Vostal, 2015), by (unsuccessfully) proposing a departmental policy of 'office hours-only' email:

> *"I can't help but check my email, it's my own fault but I can't help [it]. It's connected to my phone … so I check it all the time … people email me and I feel an obligation to respond…. It's in my own head most of the time but I just don't like to have backlog." (Reuben)*

Mobile phones and other technologies afford so much, for example in sustaining and developing research relations. Decuypere and Simons (2014) suggest that academic practice be considered *humandigital* because, they claim, it makes little sense to describe it in terms of humans or non-humans, material or digital, etc. Indeed, academics do equip themselves to be 'always on' for reasons other than teaching and administration. Research may be conducted out of hours with colleagues in other time zones:

> *"Got another colleague I'm writing an article with, the article is nearly finished … he keeps wanting to speak to me at weekends because he's in Rio de Janeiro and he's the only person I'll talk with at the weekend." (Adam)*

The possibilities of working by choice and at one's own convenience are seductive. However, once academics have the means to do this (which they are increasingly assumed to have), and especially when administrative responsibilities have been assigned, it is clear that being 'always on' becomes a normal expectation (Gornall and Salisbury, 2012). Whilst work-life boundaries may be fluid and ever-changing, it is notable that the financial cost of the mobile phones, broadband, and other paraphernalia needed to be 'always on' is generally outsourced to academics themselves.

Learning Academic Work Practices - Disciplinary Networks and Relationships

Our participants experienced their external disciplinary networks as sites of work-learning – with PhD supervisors, ex-fellow students, collaborators – far more than their own departments, even where formal mentoring relationships existed. Learning was effected through shared work (joint research and writing projects), advice, conference participation, emulation of more senior others and a range of networked activities.

Conferences, in addition to their disciplinary content, have a special place in our consideration of the learning of disciplinary work practices. They provide a face-to-face space for talking about work practices beyond one's own department, for observing and participating in disciplinary work practices, and for developing an understanding of what disciplinary community membership entails:

> *"you just learn by doing, you know? … no-one really told me a lot of this stuff when I was first doing my PhD, which means you're kind of ignorant*

… you pick it up just from being involved, normally at conferences actually." (Reuben)

But conference participation – and the essential disciplinary practice learning and networking entailed – relies on academics being able to leave home and visit distant places for sustained periods. The constitution of such disciplinary networks may thus be inherently gendered: for women with children, like Cathy, maternity leave and motherhood disrupt the ability to participate in those events and to learn this 'stuff' of disciplinary academic practice. Compounding this disadvantage, women may then be seen as available for higher levels of labour-intensive administrative work that spills into the very time available for disciplinary activity. Thus Cathy acted as admissions officer for several years following the birth of her first child. Such essential roles – 'work about the work' - are all-consuming and do not usually provide women with "the types of 'currency' that advance their career" (Coate and Kandiko Howson, 2014). Cathy's years of labour for the department and institution were not rewarded by support (financial or otherwise) for developing her disciplinary academic practice. It was only through reconnecting with the discipline and former collaborators that she was encouraged to do what many of our male participants had learnt so well:

"I thought this one, I will go. It's a big conference. I'll fund myself. I'll just get back into networks again.... My old supervisor was at it and … she's really been a mentor to me and she's so good … she basically [said] 'Right, this is what you need to do. You'll need to give yourself head space, scoping what other people are doing, just get yourself back into reading … 'removing all of the stuff that now isn't relevant in terms of administrative things because that's just taking up your head space … you'll have to get rid of that and then just completely zone in'."

It is unsurprising that a woman from another institution had to spell out the need to discard the 'work about the work' to enable 'timeless time'. It was after all (consciously or otherwise) in her own department's interests for Cathy to undertake a role that kept her close to home, which others would have rejected as lacking any 'currency' for promotion.

In terms of learning disciplinary academic practices, it is notable that the PhDs completed by these four academics had not prepared them for the daily stuff of academic work. Recent attempts to reorient PhD training, towards 'employability' and transferable skills, tend to draw on an idealised vision of the academic workplace as a knowledge-building disciplinary community (Zukas and Malcolm, 2015). Doctoral preparation in the social sciences emphasises 'the work' - dedicated research time and effort ('timeless time'), and possibly some teaching. As we have shown, in the lived experience of academic work, much of working time is not consumed by 'the work' itself (even if we include teaching and activities such as course leadership). Instead it is constituted by the 'work about the work', be this answering emails, filling in module forms, recruiting students or pacifying colleagues.

Conventional PhD training in the social sciences arguably sets up unrealistic expectations of what it means to be an academic, constructing an idealised version of academic work as 'timeless time', rather than as distributed across scheduled, personal and contract time.

Learning Academic Work Practices - Online Identities

Whilst emails (receiving, deleting, reading and responding) effect academic work in relation to department and institution, and conference networks particularly effect academic work practice in relation to discipline, other networks also effect work. Academics use online research networks or platforms (e.g. ResearchGate, Academia.edu, Google Scholar), blogs and other online interventions to build identity, find relevant publications and engage with other researchers. ResearchGate claims to *'connect researchers and make it easy for them to share and access scientific output, knowledge, and expertise. On ResearchGate they find what they need to advance their research.'* (https://www.researchgate.net/about). Perhaps less explicitly, they contribute to the metricisation of academic success, e.g. providing citation counts and network maps to support promotion applications. Academics are now able to measure themselves in relation to their peers *("Your RG Score is based on the publications in your profile and how other researchers interact with your content on ResearchGate")*, and track their citations, downloads and 'reads'. Academia.edu measures its own achievement in terms of citations as a proxy for academic success: "*Boost Your Citations By 73% - … papers uploaded to Academia.edu receive a 73% boost in citations over 5 years."* (https://www.academia.edu).

These activities may be seen as voluntary, enabling academics to escape the constraints of institutional website structures, to ensure the portability of their academic identity or to engage with a small specialist community. Alan, as a post-doc, sees this engagement as vital for his career:

> *"…the way things move at the moment … if you're not up to speed with the latest debates then somebody is going to be, and you're going to be the guy that's left out … So you have to plug into what's going on all around."*

However, institutions also expect academics to take up virtual identities, by means of blogging, tweeting and other new media activities, or by insisting on participation in online registries (creating more 'work about the work'). Southside, for example, requires all academics to join ORCID:

> *"…a hub that connects researchers and research through the embedding of ORCID identifiers in key workflows, such as research profile maintenance, manuscript submissions, grant applications, and patent applications."* (http://orcid.org/)

This information enables the institution to track and compare individual research activities and outputs, and embeds the university's expectations of academic productivity and 'impact' in daily work practices.

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, we have tried to open the lid of academic practice, not to reflect a complete picture, but to begin to understand how academics negotiate the 'workplaces' of discipline, department and institution in their daily work and learn academic practices. We focused on a single social science, but the practices here are unremarkable and would be recognised in many other disciplines, including in the humanities.

We have resisted the temptation to base our analysis on individual stories, and sought to sustain a sociomaterial 'sensibility' (Mol, 2010) throughout. However, in attending to time and, to a lesser extent, space, we have noted the strategies and technologies academics learn in order to snatch 'timeless time' and undertake disciplinary learning. Some do so through rigorous control of e.g. weekends as 'their' (disciplinary) time. But not all are able to do this, or to travel to the essential disciplinary workplaces of conferences and network meetings. Those excluded from these disciplinary learning sites may in turn be burdened with administrative roles which erode even more of the time needed for disciplinary work.

The department and university, rather than the discipline, are key actors in composing everyday work practices, in particular the 'work about the work' which consumes academic time, in working hours and outside them. Whether writing 'keep-warm' emails to applicants, managing colleagues on behalf of the department, or developing online identities to enable the institution to claim credit for research done by its members, this work is concerned with sustaining the institution (and department), rather than disciplinary engagement. Academics learn academic practices, not through their PhD training, but in answering emails, filling in module forms, going to conferences and developing web identities. However, institutions and departments are not generous pedagogues; universities are, as frequently articulated, 'greedy', and the reality for academics is that lessons learned well may result in institutional exploitation, gender (and other) inequalities, overwork and – ironically – the squeezing of discipline into whatever snatches of 'timeless time' can be created.

By taking a sociomaterial approach, we have begun to open the 'black box' of everyday academic practice and workplace learning. As far as academic learning is concerned, this approach holds the promise of better support for academics in negotiating the complex demands of discipline, department and university work practice. It also names overwork, institutional exploitation and unequal power relations as systemic rather than personal. Finally, for those working in universities, it identifies the ever-growing trend for disciplinary work to be enacted in the times and spaces between the 'work about the work' and suggests that, despite academic work being *humandigital*, resistance and change are possible.

NOTES

[1] Using 'effect' as a noun within sociomaterial discussions is potentially confusing because we tend to think of humans and non-humans as pre-existing 'things', rather than as outcomes. It is also potentially confusing when used as a verb in relation to 'things': by effect, we mean here that something is brought into being, that one thing is causing another to happen. So, when we say that emails effect academic work, we mean that they *bring about* academic work.

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