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What brought us together to form a community for scholarship

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What brought us together to form a community for scholarship

Abstract

We are a group of teaching-focused academics who share a passion for learning, teaching and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) in Higher Education (HE). In order to understand how practitioners from a diversity of backgrounds and disciplines came to be in their present LTS (Learning, Teaching & Scholarship) academic roles, we embarked on a Collaborative Autoethnography (CAE). This approach allowed us to use our personal narratives to explore what it means to be a SoTL practitioner in HE, and to analyse these narratives by using textual analysis.

This paper unpacks these narratives, focusing on three themes: our rich and diverse backgrounds, influences on our routes to our current academic roles, and how we are loud and proud to be on a teaching-focused career path. It will be of interest to academics who are on, or contemplating, a teaching focused contract. It will also be of relevance to senior staff in HE who wish to understand the nature of these roles, and who wish to consider how to provide appropriate institutional structures to support and nurture these staff.

Keywords

SoTL, collaborative autoethnography, teaching-focused academics, interdisciplinary, scholarship, academic career pathways.

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This project received ethical approval from [institution] College of Science and Engineering Ethics Committee.

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What Brought Us Together to Form a Community for Scholarship

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We are a group of teaching-focused academics who share a passion for learning, teaching and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) in Higher Education (HE). In order to understand how practitioners from a diversity of backgrounds and disciplines came to be in their present LTS (Learning, Teaching & Scholarship) academic roles, we embarked on a Collaborative Autoethnography (CAE). This approach allowed us to use our personal narratives to explore what it means to be a SoTL practitioner in HE, and to analyse these narratives by using textual analysis.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper describes the story of how we came together as a community of scholars. We met as a group of eight female LTS (Learning, Teaching & Scholarship) academics who came together during the COVID-19 pandemic via our Institution's SoTL network due to our shared interest in and passion for SoTL (Scholarship of Teaching and Learning). Engagement with SoTL is expected from teaching focused colleagues in our institution, and is, in fact, a necessary part of career development and progression. We connected with each other based on our mutual understanding of SoTL as an integral part of our (teaching) practice, in that we were thinking of becoming SoTL rather than simply undertaking SoTL. During the discussion we realised that we enjoyed each other's company and continued to meet regularly on-line. We began exploring and questioning our drive and motivation for SoTL, leading to exploration of our background stories, simply out of curiosity. Despite the diverse academic backgrounds of our members, we discovered surprising commonalities in our teaching/scholarship-focused academic journeys. During our meetings, we recognised that there was academic potential and merit in studying and sharing our personal paths via autoethnography (AE). One of our key questions was, 'How did we come to have this shared interest in scholarship?' and that became the fundamental question motivating this research. Our work also investigates the route into SoTL which we academics took thus adding to the work undertaken about staff progression on these pathways (Tierney et al., 2020).

Our group is now established and recognised in our institution as the 'SenSEI' (Sensational SoTL Ethics Initiative) group and our value is appreciated, with our group having been asked to lead and support other SoTLers by hosting an Un-Conference (2021) and Pre-Conference (2022) for our Institution's Learning and Teaching Conferences. (Dickson et al., 2021 and 2022). Some of us are also members of other institutional initiatives, and we are recognised as core members of the SoTL community at our university.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Within this fast-moving workplace, the question which drew us together was deceptively simple: how did we become interested in SoTL to the extent we found ourselves in conversation with each other? This question drove us to consider who engages in SOTL and our identity as academic educators. Both concepts comprise considerable academic literatures in their own right. What follows is one route through the work that has already been undertaken which provides us with a context for our own identity narratives.

What is SoTL?

Now that definitions of SoTL have been operationalized into promotion criteria, we do not revisit that literature here. Rather, we focus on the rich descriptions of the manner in which issues arising from teaching can be addressed, thus providing more knowledge from which a more specific definition of teaching in HE may be drawn.

Work by Kreber (2004) gave currency to the idea of 'reflection' as part of scholarship. Her model of 'reflection' argues that university teachers "engage in content, process and premise reflection in three different domains of teaching knowledge .... instructional, pedagogical and curricular knowledge" (Kreber, 2004, p31). Importantly, Kreber's work injected Higher Education SoTL discourse with knowledge of Mezirow's transformational learning theory and Zimmerman's self-regulatory learning cycle. Mezirow's transformational learning theory has been criticised because of its lack of attention to the necessity of understanding how historical, political and social contexts impinge on learning (Kreber, 2004). By asking academics to link their beliefs about reflection with beliefs about teaching as identified by Trigwell and Prosser's (2004) *Approaches to Teaching Inventory* Kreber showed, among other things, that reflection tends to occur within the assumptions on which the institution is based and does not usually critique them, if reflection happens at all.

Tierney's work (which began in a Life Science background, but is not limited to it), is based on the educational idea of 'threshold concepts'. Using this work, Tierney addresses the issue of why life scientists might struggle with SoTL. Her early work suggests that her colleagues, used to working in a positivist paradigm, found writing about teaching often meant they had to write in an interpretivist paradigm which was entirely alien to them. What was supposed to be normative – if I know about it, I can teach it – suddenly became strange, a source of anxiety and struggle. This 'troublesome knowledge' might pave the way for development in SoTL, but it might also tend to put people off persevering with it. While disciplinary knowledge may have taken years to develop, academics are often expected to reach similar levels in a new discipline in far less time with little support alongside continuing development in their first discipline (Tierney, 2017). In order to support colleagues during this process, Tierney uses another sociological idea, the 'community of practice' (Tierney et al., 2020). This model, as she uses it, suggests that learning often takes place among people who have a mutual interest, set up a joint initiative and share a repertoire of knowledge and skills (Wenger, 1998). Tierney uses four case studies to describe how such communities of scholars are a source of encouragement, engagement, communication, development and promotion.

Who engages in SoTL?: Academic identity

The concept of communities of practice raises the issue of the membership of such a community. Newer work addresses the issues of academic identity of university teachers who must demonstrate their ability to teach through their scholarship. In these studies, 'identity' is usually based on various sociological definitions based in turn on symbolic interactionism. Stryker (2002) studies the way in which social structures affect the self and its social behaviour. Burke and Stets (2009) study the processes at work within the self and argue that these strands are mutually reinforcing. Most of the studies on identity hold that the self is multiple, is narrated, and interacts with the roles and social expectations in society in ways which may or may not verify it.

Skelton (2012) theorised three groups of teacher identities in research-led institutions: teaching specialists, blended professionals, and researchers who teach. He noted that within these broad categories there were differences in the lived experience of those who inhabited the same role. One senior lecturer felt that his expertise was valued by the institution, and he found satisfaction in his teaching role. Another teacher found teaching equally satisfying but eventually left the university after being faced with growing research targets but with no lessening in her teaching load. The balance between agency and structure continues throughout subsequent studies.

Van Lankveld et al.'s (2017) literature review of studies on academic teacher identity found that teacher identity was strengthened by contact with students and other members of staff. The wider context of higher education was experienced as having a constraining effect either through neoliberal management practices or the tension between research and teaching where the former is perceived as more prestigious than the latter. Five psychological aspects were found to be involved in the development of a teacher identity:

- a sense of appreciation
- a sense of connectedness
- a sense of competence
- a sense of commitment
- imagining a future career trajectory.

They note that a university teacher may find like-minded professionals across departments rather than within them depending on whether (or not) teaching is valued within a department (see also Laiho et al., 2022). There is a growing number of articles on researchers as teachers which are mentioned here because of the overlap in terms of teaching identity and context. Healey and Davies (Healey & Davies, 2019) make an interesting point, extending the definition of research to include scholarship as research work. They define "research work for the scholarly development of all aspects of academic work (research, teaching, administration and community service)" (Healey & Davies, 2019, p. 9). Their work is based on literature that highlights issues we found in our own scholarship efforts such as the disparity in esteem of labour (Coate & Howson, 2016), or women carrying higher teaching, administrative and pastoral care loads without recognition of labour (Angervall & Beach, 2018; Brommesson et al., 2022; Gómez Cama et al., 2016; Kalm, 2019).

They also undertook a research project, identifying that there is a gendered difference in perception of what constitutes research, mainly that of scholarship, and research relating to teaching.

From this literature review, some tentative conclusions may be drawn. Research and teaching are the predominant activities of universities. Strong links, or a nexus, are thought to exist between research and teaching in the majority of institutions and staff are encouraged to adopt a 'research-oriented' approach to teaching practice (Healey and Jenkins, 2009). However, the categorization of academic activities into disciplinary research and teaching can lead to a greater emphasis being placed on the former and it often does not include recognition of SoTL (Brogt et al., 2020). While acknowledging that SoTL remains ill-defined and contested (Haggis, 2003), it is important to emphasise that those who undertake it tend to feel they are less well regarded than research colleagues (Van Lankveld et al., 2017). Furthermore, those on research contracts either find it difficult to teach (McCune, 2021) or wish to do it as little as possible because it is so little regarded (Laiho et al., 2022). However, there is a growing body of literature, based on theories from education, sociology and psychology, which have been selected on the basis that they provide an explanatory frame through which to achieve greater understanding of a particular practical issue which has been identified by colleagues teaching in HE. The 'Community of Practice' model has been shown to benefit university teachers in the life sciences (Tierney et al., 2017) and similar findings (Van Lankveld et al., 2017) suggest that the wider university community also gains psychological benefits, regarded as necessary for teaching identity, from this approach.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODS

Background and rationale

We first came together because we had a shared interest in all things SoTL (Honeychurch et al., 2021). As we continued to meet we noticed that, although we were from very different disciplinary backgrounds and areas of the University, we had a lot in common with each other. We wanted to understand what was unique about academics on teaching tracks, as opposed to research tracks and, when we started to discuss how to conceptualise the difference between these tracks, we realised that it was through the sharing of our personal stories that we were beginning to understand these differences. While at first glance we appeared to be from very different subject backgrounds, we thought that there were also commonalities that could lead to a rich picture of the academic scholar. We also realised that an important part of our conversations were the seemingly irrelevant tangents and side-tracks that circled around common themes, and we wanted a mechanism to capture these. Therefore, we looked for a methodology that would help us to look holistically at our individual and shared narratives and to analyse them.

We decided against a specific theoretical or identity framework to scaffold our inquiry as we felt it would inevitably bias our explorations towards predefined parameters, and we deliberately wanted to enter this meaning-making process without any expectations of where it would lead; to enable our writing and conversations to meander naturally in joint identity negotiations, rather than being tempted to fit within confines of predetermination. One of us has previously explored the concepts of patchwork identities, a concept from social psychology that proposes that our identities adapt—in part—dependent on context and undergo continuous renegotiation and adaptation based on context (Keupp, 2012). When we met initially, most of us had experienced different paths on route to our present positions. We found solace in shared and different experiences, creating a new joint patchwork and thus merged our negotiations into a joint narrative.

Two of us (SH and NT) (Tasler, 2022) were familiar with writing in an autoethnographical style and knew how powerful it could be as a methodology, a writing style (Richardson, 2000, 2001), and as a way of forming strong bonds when used collaboratively (Hamon et al., 2015). We agreed to put our collective trust in this methodology as a way of itself building collective trust. Therefore, the methodology that frames this piece of scholarship is a type of autoethnography (AE) called collaborative autoethnography (CAE).

What are AE and CAE?

AE is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyse personal experiences in order to understand cultural experience (Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2010; Lapadat, 2017). This is a reflective and reflexive approach which seemed appropriate because of the nature of SoTL itself. In autoethnography we write for the other through the self, and SoTL is evidencing our own practice—understanding wider cultural, systemic issues our learner and ourselves encounter through the evidencing of our own practice.

A CAE is a form of AE specifically for use for communal research and scholarship. It begins when a group of researchers or scholars decide to pool their experiences in order to explore what commonalities and differences in meaning can be uncovered (Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2010) and seek to find joint meaning via an understanding of their similar and different experiences (Chang, Ngunjiri and Hernandez, 2013). This is not just about telling stories, it is about digging into these stories and reflecting on them in order to understand a shared context (Arnold, 2020; Denzin, 2014).

We had another reason for choosing an AE. We knew from the beginning of this project that the area we were discussing was one that provokes strong emotions in practitioners, and we wanted to find a methodology that allowed us to include our emotions and not bracket them off. AE is often associated with pain (Arnold, 2020). At first this caused us to pause, because we did not think of our experiences as being painful, per se. However, on consideration we realised that we were all coming from a common place of hurt – the hurt of being categorised as secondary to researchers. We wanted to draw attention to this emotion, and not to hide it away, and we wanted to acknowledge that our feelings were legitimate. As Denzin (2014, p. 74) notes, AE and cognate methodologies can be used in order to "destigmatize the experiences of damaged egos", and this made CAE an appropriate methodology to tell our stories.

Pragmatism

We write above about CAE as if it were a single approach, however CAE is better understood as being an umbrella term for a cluster of approaches and it is open for scholars to decide which methods of data collection and analysis are suitable for their project. From the beginning we have been pragmatic in our selection of methodology and methods. Rather than being committed to any single epistemological or ontological paradigm (which could be problematic with a diverse group of scholars), our combination of methods is intentionally heterogenous, and is based on the principles of bricolage (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). This approach allows scholars to play to their strengths and to learn from each other, and it allows scholars to choose methods that are most appropriate for each data (Honeychurch, 2023). It is particularly suitable for multi-disciplinary scholarship projects and for scholarship groups where members have different levels of experience and expertise.

Methods

In order to collect and analyse our data we used the following combination of methods (Table 1):

Table 1. Workflow of data collection and analysis

1. Individual freewriting around three agreed prompts. Narratives were uploaded to Teams by an agreed date.
2. All read all narratives to see if project was viable.
3. Meeting (Zoom) to discuss narratives and decide methods.
4. Decision for 2 members (CL and FD) to conduct thematic analysis on all narratives.
5. Results uploaded to Teams.
6. All read and agreed results of thematic analysis.
7. Meeting (Zoom) to discuss thematic analysis. Consensus to group cognate themes into broad topics. Choice of topic for this paper.
8. Return to coded narratives to mine for quotations to frame this paper.

We began our CAE by each free writing a personal narrative around three prompts that we agreed as a group. At this early stage we were still getting to know each other and seeing if we had enough in common to make the project worthwhile. In undertaking this exercise, we were guided by Laurel Richardson's work on writing as a type of enquiry, "Writing is also a way of "knowing" – a method of discovery and analysis. By writing in different ways, we discover new aspects of our topic and our relationship to it. Form and content are inseparable" (Richardson, 2000, p. 923).

We each wrote individually and uploaded our narratives to our Teams files area by an agreed date. We then each took time

Table 2. Backgrounds of participants in study

Participant	Discipline/Service	Job	No. Years in Relevant Role
NT	Academic and Digital Development (ADD) and Education	Academic Developer (Senior Lecturer)	16 (In HE rather than current role) ~28 in education sector
BD	Education	Senior Lecturer	18
CL	Life Sciences	Lecturer	3.5
FD	Chemistry	Senior Lecturer	6.5
LP	Medicine and Medical Education	Medical Doctor and professor respectively	17
SH	ADD, Philosophy and Education	Good Practice Advisor	23 (in HE, rather than current role)
LS	Chemistry	Senior Lecturer	15
VP	Theatre Studies	Senior Lecturer; Dean of Postgraduate Teaching in College of Arts	19 (in HE, rather than in current role)

to read over all the narratives before meeting as a group. When we met over Zoom, we agreed that there were interesting similarities between our stories that we would like to further explore. Two members of our group (CL and FD) offered to conduct a thematic analysis to identify common themes (Braun et al., 2019) The results were uploaded to Teams and each of us looked over the results individually. At our next Zoom meeting there was consensus that the thematic analysis had captured relevant themes, and a decision to further group these themes into broader topics, which we did as a group. We then chose the topic for our first project (this paper). Two members of the group (CL and FD) returned to the coded narratives in order to find indicative quotations with which to frame our discussion of our findings.

RESULTS

Prior to writing our narratives, an important point that we realised when we first met as a group was that we come from a diverse range of backgrounds and experiences which covered multiple disciplines (e.g. education, science, philosophy) from across all Colleges in the University, and with a range of prior experience (Table 2). As our conversations developed, we also discovered that we are at a variety of stages in our careers, from early career to dean, with years of experience in a relevant role ranging from 3.5 to >20 years. Despite these differences, we found that we shared a commonality of being on a learning, teaching and scholarship (LTS) career track and that we have had many similar experiences on this journey to become an LTS academic. As conversations deepened and through the process of writing our narratives, we identified further diversity in how we came to be in our present academic posts.

Theme 1 - Rich Backgrounds

From thematic analysis of our written accounts, we identified eight sub-categories for the first of our identified key themes, ‘rich backgrounds’ (Table 3). Some of us had followed a traditional route through academia (sub-category 4), moving from PhD studies to a research and teaching position. One participant commented:

> During the second and third years of my PhD, I also took on a Teaching Assistant role .... Through these experiences I knew I wanted to pursue a career that involved teaching and which also enabled me to further research .... When I submitted my PhD at end of third year, a post was advertised .... for a R&T position .... I was appointed to this and began in September 2003. (VP)

Others had been employed outside of academia (sub-category 1) for a period then returned to academia. One participant notes “After completing my Ph.D. I moved straight to industry as an R&D manager for a company” (FD). Despite having different experiences, one thing we all had in common was our successes in our professional or research careers (sub-category 2) before moving to the LTS track. One participant noted “I got the job [referring to GP academic fellowship]. ….At the end of the year, I secured a GP partnership and my first job at the University of Glasgow as a University Teacher” (LP). It also became clear that six participants had a wealth of teaching and learning experience (sub-category 8) of > 10 years e.g. one participant wrote “I started teaching as a Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) in Philosophy at UofG in 2002 …. till 2018. I also taught courses at Strathclyde and Aberdeen” (SH).

Table 3. Identified themes and associated sub-categories from qualitative analysis of narratives

Theme	Sub-Categories
Rich Backgrounds	1. Employment Outside of Academica 2. Job Success 3. Complex Route to Academic Post 4. Traditional Route to Academic Post 5. Smooth Route to SoTL 6. Move From Research to Teaching 7. Research Experience – do have research background; funding difficult 8. Teaching and Learning Experience – wealth of experience (~20 years)
Influences on Route to Academic Post	1. Positive Experiences and Encounters 2. Barriers to Employment in Academia – institutional; personal 3. Barriers to Going to University 4. Personal Illness 5. Personal Difficulties and Responsibilities 6. Dissatisfaction with Employment Outside Academia – role; stress; expectations 7. Job Security 8. Work/Life Balance
Pride in LTS Track	1. Expectation to conduct SoTL 2. Love of Teaching – passion; active choice 3. Love of SoTL 4. Importance of SoTL

For some of us the route to attaining a permanent academic position was straightforward and early in their career, but for others of us it was complex and took many years (sub-category 3). As one participant stated:

> On the surface, the route to my current position as a lecturer .... seems straightforward – PhD then post-doc then lecturer. However, the path was not quite so simple and it has taken me some time to get to where I am today! (CL)

Several of us had worked previously in research (sub-category 7) but made a move to teaching (sub-category 6) either due to a lack of funding e.g. one participant voiced "When my fellowship ended, I scoured the area for employment opportunities and soon realised that things looked bleak for a future in academia, despite my productivity and outputs" (LS) or because this better aligned with personal interests e.g. another participant indicated:

> "I requested this change [to LTS contract] due to …. a strong desire to ensure that I would be able to undertake a range of scholarship activities to further build on my interests in connection to learning and teaching initiatives" (VP).

In keeping with personal interest in scholarship, it became clear that some participants experienced a smooth route to SoTL (sub-category 5) e.g. one participant indicated: "For me it was an organic process because this is what I do. I started out teaching trainee teachers during my PhD, then became a learning developer, and then an academic developer" (NT).

Theme 2 - Influences on Route to Academic Post

Delving more deeply into the question of how we came to be where we are now, the second of our identified key themes was the 'influences on our routes to an academic post'. Again, eight subcategories were identified (Table 3). We did note some positive experiences and encounters such as encouragement from colleagues (sub-category 1). For example, one participant recalls:

> I scheduled to do an Out of Hours GP induction shift and completely by chance ended up partnered up with a GP who had recently completed a GP Academic Fellowship …. [the] meeting .... made me think it was 'worth a go' applying. (LP)

However, in general, we faced many barriers and challenges on the way to reaching our current positions, starting from even getting to University to study (sub-category 3), as one participant indicated, "[my] family didn't want to let me go away to uni, and everyone in my family did an apprenticeship before going into higher education – you need to learn what real life is about before filling your brain with ideas" (NT).

We all noted personal difficulties, with some having experienced personal illness (subcategory 4), as one participant stated "…. during my post-doctoral work …. I became ill with a potentially life-threatening auto-immune blood platelet disorder and was off sick for the majority of 2013" (CL), or responsibilities for caring for others (subcategory 5), for example as another participant noted "…. my husband took chronic fatigue and was absent from his work for longish periods and it became necessary for me to be working in case his health deteriorated so much that we became dependent on my income" (BD).

A number of us also noted job dissatisfaction (sub-category 6) and work life imbalances (sub-category 8) while working outside of academia, and a lack of self-belief, despite having successful careers. For example, one participant noted:

> [referring to role in industry as an R&D manager] Whilst I was able to apply the knowledge gained in my University studies, I did not do much hands on science …. I was only in my mid-20s and could not envisage up to 40 years sitting at a desk with more and more managerial duties and less science so returned to academia. (FD)

Another participant outlined:

> As I contemplated returning to work after maternity leave, I had to face the reality that all of this wasn't going to fit into my life going forward. I couldn't give my all to being a good mum, a good GP, a good doctoral student and a good member of University staff with my current working configuration. (LP)

There were also institutional influences (sub-category 2), including factors which had an impact on our job security (sub-category 7). For some of us, our first academic position was just a temporary contract. One participant describes the uncertainty of starting out in academia as "…. I was hired as a temporary lecturer on the LTS track in the School of Chemistry at the University of Glasgow. After two extensions I was made permanent …." (FD). For another, a restructuring led to a downgrade of their academic supportive role "The University downgraded the role of Learning Technologist from being an academic support role to being glorified admin, and nobody senior considered us capable of research or SoTL ...." (SH).

Theme 3 – Pride in LTS Track

Despite the aforementioned barriers, one striking commonality we discovered is that we all share a love of SoTL and have 'pride in being on the LTS track', which is the third and final key theme that we identified (Table 3). We recognised that we have a contractual obligation to conduct SoTL (sub-category 1) and that this forms part of the promotion criteria for this job category. One participant noted:

> Nearly five years ago, the University Teacher job contracts were changed, and we were rebranded as Learning, Teaching and Scholarship (LTS) Lecturers and the requirements for this job family were redefined. These requirements include scholarship and suggest that time for this should be included in the job role. (LS)

Another participant highlighted "With regards to promotion opportunities in my LTS job track, it is essential for me to demonstrate proven ability to publish in the SoTL field" (CL). However, transcending any contractual obligations, the participants share a passion for and love of teaching (sub-category 2) and SoTL (sub-category 3). One participant highlighted the influence of their parents, who were teachers, and commented "Their passion for learning and their creativity in addressing challenges must be hard-wired into my genetic code because, even while I pursued my various interests, the thrill of teaching and supporting learners gave me the deepest satisfaction" (LS). Another important point which was highlighted is that this career path is an active choice for us, as exemplified by one participant who stated "…. I made the active choice to be an academic GP (rather than a GP who works at the University)" (LP). Another participant noted that they "requested this change [to an LTS contract] due to …. a strong desire to ensure that I would be able to undertake a range of scholarship activities to further build on my interests in connection to learning and teaching initiatives" (VP).

In addition to a love of teaching and SoTL, we also recognised a shared value of the importance of scholarship in enhancing our learning and teaching practices (sub-category 4). One participant wrote "A key aspect of my position .... is to enhance PGT provision and the student experience – scholarship work is vital to achieve this" (CL) and another commented "I 'gave up' my GP partnership and now only work a day a week clinically .... I work 4 days a week in the University which has given me more opportunity to invest some time in scholarship" (LP).

DISCUSSION

This discussion is based on the realisation that excellent research does not necessarily produce excellent teaching (Skelton 2012). Yet quality assurance and quality enhancement exercises introduced to enhance the quality of teaching have not generated the systemic change to achieve parity of esteem between research and teaching which was envisaged (Skelton 2012). Four points emerge.

Firstly, our study provides confirmatory evidence, frequently noted in the literature, of negative perceptions of teaching in highly stratified research-intensive universities (See inter alia Skelton 2012, Van Lankveld et al., 2017 and Laiho et al. 2022). Taking, for example, the issue of how we had come to be in our teaching positions: while some of us moved quite smoothly between PhD study and university teaching, the experience of others of us shows more discontinuity as discussed in the literature (Skelton 2012): short-term contracts (Graduate Teaching Contracts); periods of not working between contracts; solid qualifications but still of insufficient reach to be shortlisted for lecturing positions; illness; roles being made redundant.

Numerous studies have exposed the disadvantages female faculty experience within academia, while on one side carrying more teaching responsibilities than male counterparts (Angervall & Beach, 2018) and being perceived as less capable in research (Brommesson et al., 2022), but when actually teaching, the male counterparts are still perceived as being better teachers (MacNell et al., 2015). So, it seems as if we are caught in an unwinnable situation, which was exacerbated by the COVID19 pandemic. Compared with the care taken over the early career development of those on research contracts, and the employment benefits of permanent contracts, the experience of those of us who move into university teaching is not as smooth and does raise questions about the reality of parity of esteem between university researchers and teachers, who are predominantly women, at the entrance to university teaching (Cama et al., 2016).

Secondly, however, the study does provide some evidence of the qualities of agency demonstrated by our group as well as evidence of motivation to undertake this process. All of us had achieved success before entering university teaching. All were educated to PhD level, and all were employable. Some of us took a university-based route through research and/or teaching facing barriers already described. Some of us had moved into a profession. One had been an R&D manager in industry. For those of us who left university, two describe an intellectual boredom with their work which caused them to think about university employment. In addition, two of us who had been dissuaded by family from taking, or considering, a university career, had previously overcome barriers of stress or undiagnosed learning conditions which made their route into university in the first place late or laden with family doubt. As a group of agents, we are intelligent and resilient female colleagues who persevere. This is not always the case as the literature demonstrates that for some the difficulties inherent in university teaching may lead to resignation (Skelton 2012).

Thirdly, there are three benefits of being a university teacher. Although these can be found implicitly in the literature (Tierney et al. 2020), in this study they are explicit. First, we demonstrate a very strong and detailed love for teaching and for the study of teaching. None of the group feels second-class about what we do when we teach. Rather, teaching is itself an immensely satisfying activity: "the thrill of teaching and supporting learners gave me my deepest satisfaction" (LS). Second, learning about teaching is experienced as a key motivation because it enables us, as educators, to "enhance .... the student experience" (CL). Finally, as a group we have found enjoyment through recognition of others who are willing to engage in professional academic discussion about issues of teaching and learning as posited by Van Lankveld et al. (2017) and Tierney et al (2020).

The fourth conclusion is methodological. Being in an affinity group provided the necessary encouragement (Van Lankveld et al., 2017) to persevere with SoTL writing when a key barrier was the lack of time to write because of our teaching loads and the associated administration. The choice of CAE enabled us to re-frame our identities as intelligent, successful, resilient women who teach at university and whose teaching and scholarship of teaching brings deep personal satisfaction.

LIMITATIONS

We began this research in full knowledge of the standard objections to autoethnography as a research method: that is little more than a fiction (Walford, 2004); that it is seen to be self-indulgent, narcissistic, introspective and individualised (Atkinson, 1997; Coffey, 1999). We believe that by using a model of collaborative autoethnography we have mitigated against this – in particular by writing our individual narratives alone and only reading those of others once we had completed ours. We explain in our methodology how we then treat these narratives as data to be coded, and discover many common themes to our experiences.

Nevertheless, we appreciate that we are a group of women from the same institution, and that our experiences might be unique to that institution. As such, we make no claims that our research findings are generalisable. Rather, we present this as a case study of female academics on learning, teaching and scholarship contracts, and hope that our story resonates with others on similar contracts.

CONCLUSION

This paper sets out our reflections about educator identity in a research-intensive university. Our journey began with the desire to understand how we had all individually come to have an interest in SoTL, and we undertook this CAE in order to try and answer that question collectively. In doing this, we also began to unpack the identity of scholars of learning and teaching in HE. We have experienced the constraints noted in the literature. We are all too aware of the challenges that teaching-focused academics face in order to become confident educators, and we are also aware of the further barriers there are to undertake SoTL. However, this is not the whole story. Our narratives confirm that we enjoy our teaching-focused roles and that, despite working in a research-intensive university, we are proud to be scholars of teaching and learning. It is our identity, and it is ours to shape.

FINAL THOUGHTS / FUTURE DIRECTIONS

A serendipitous series of events led to us finding each other and discovering our common interests. The bonds that have formed between us, and the trust that has built up as a result of the CAE, have allowed us to have open and frank discussions about the challenges that teaching-focused academics face. This paper describes some of our experiences. However, as practitioners of CAE and AE will appreciate, narratives that we produced as part of this exercise contain many more themes than we have been able to discuss in this paper.

In particular, we intend to further unpack what it is to be SoTL practitioner and teaching-focused academic, and to consider in detail the various barriers to and enablers of SoTL; although we have touched on some of these in this paper, we have a rich seam of narrative to further draw from, and there is a wealth of literature to use.

Second, we have emphasized here the importance of forming supportive groups and have spoken about our own small group. However, we have not written in any detail about our institutional SoTL network, which some of us helped to form and which helped all of us to find each other and our confidence in our roles.

Last, but by no means least, a commonly recurring theme throughout our narratives is our specific interests in student diversity and the importance of grounding SoTL in the specific needs of our own students. We will be returning to all these themes in future papers.

We end with a collective hope for the future direction of SoTL. Our experiences have shown us that not only is SoTL more enjoyable when undertaken as part of an affinity group, but the results that it produces are more meaningful. SoTL is, we believe, something that practitioners *become,* rather than merely something that scholars do. We hope that this piece will encourage others to also become SoTL.

DISCLOSURE

This project received ethical approval from the University of Glasgow College of Science and Engineering Ethics Committee.

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