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Make me authentic, but not here: Reflexive struggles with academic identity and authentic leadership

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Make Me Authentic, But Not Here:

Reflexive Struggles with Academic Identity and Authentic Leadership

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Abstract

This paper presents a reflexive auto-ethnography of the experience of teaching authentic leadership (AL) to MBA students. It traces parallels between the challenges of AL and the challenges of academic identity work, grounded specifically in the experience of having to teach something one does not fully endorse. Both AL and academic identity work emerge as struggle - riddled with false starts, best intentions and self-deception, and entwined in the politics of pragmatism, idealism, ambition and survival. The subject position of the mature entrant to academia who is also an 'early career scholar' is likened to an awkward adolescent, experimenting with shades of independence/dependence, resistance/compliance and voice/silence. Based on these reflections, having AL on the curriculum involves a particular kind of identity regulation for students and academics alike, running counter to philosophical notions of authenticity as striving for one's own way in the world. Authentic leadership will only flourish in the business school if academics muster the courage to acknowledge its relevance for our own role as teacher-leaders, rather than simply teaching or writing to its abstract, ideological appeal.

Setting the Scene

This paper is a reflexive exploration of some of the complexities of working with authentic leadership (AL) in management learning. This work began as a theoretical critique of the construct of AL, based on a thematic analysis of a group of MBA students' apparent resistance to a course which I (first author) was involved in teaching. Over time, this has evolved into an auto-ethnographic reflection on the implications of teaching something one does not fully endorse, and the disconcerting ways in which the challenges of authenticity are entangled with the choices we make about how we invest our energies. I hope to show how teaching something which runs counter to one's beliefs, or at least, instincts, is more than a 'local difficulty' of workload-management and unlucky scheduling; it highlights the vulnerability and elusiveness of authenticity in our own role as teacher-leaders, and the potential for hypocrisy when we teach authentic leadership to our students.

The paper concerns academic identity, so I provide some autobiographical detail to position myself in relation to certain discourses and experiences of selfhood. I am a mature entrant to academia, having spent many years in the management consulting sector before deciding to do a PhD in organisational psychology and try to forge a second career as a university scholar. In terms of my academic positioning, I am in that apprenticeship stage known, in the UK at least, as the period of the 'early career scholar'. I am also a woman.

My corporate background is in 'blue chip' companies with a 'high performance culture' and an 'up or out' policy for performance management. I think I was relatively successful in this world, and I certainly appreciate the skills of planning, management and stakeholder engagement that I developed there. However, it was a world where there was little time or space to reflect on something just because it was interesting; it felt like everything had to be for a *purpose*. Thus, one of the ironies of framing my academic identity struggles in terms of 'authenticity' is that my plucking up the courage to leave corporate life to spend time thinking and writing about the issues that really matter to me *was* a search for greater authenticity.

My PhD and much of my research draw on phenomenology and existentialism to explore the experiential complexities of organisation. I am drawn to writers who suggest that our organisations might be better places if we acknowledged the messy realities of the human beings who populate them, rather than trying to encapsulate human experiences into prescriptions for organisational performance, denying their contradictions and anxieties. I see phenomenology and existentialism as powerful frameworks for exploring such mess, but I also appreciate ideas from psychoanalysis, critical social psychology and post-structuralism. I am

hopeful about the potential for the best of human beings to emerge in their relationship with work and career, but suspicious about approaches which make this seem too easy or idealistic, for instance, in much of the Positive Organisational Scholarship (POS) movement. Because of all this, one of the concepts I write about is 'authenticity' - a core concern in existentialism, phenomenology and other philosophies of mess.

However, the connections between these autobiographical factors and my approach to teaching AL have emerged only gradually over the course of the work presented in this paper. Initially, I had little sense of either experiential or theoretical connections between authentic leadership and academic identity work. Instead, the catalyst for this paper was that a leadership module which I taught received poor student feedback. I remember being disappointed, because I had taught other modules with this particular group of students, which had been received more positively. So, with university ethics approval, I asked the students whether they would be willing to be interviewed by me to get a greater understanding of their experiences. Five students agreed to an interview - three men and two women. All were British nationals, with ages ranging between early 30s and late 40s. All were in full-time employment and studying for the MBA part-time.

I include this biographical snapshot of the students to help contextualise my discussions with them. However, this paper does not present data from these interviews as a formal thematic synthesis of a complete data-set (although I did attempt this in an earlier draft). Rather, fragments from the interviews are used to reveal the students' dislike of this module and their attempts to make sense of it. These are then used as springboards for reflexive analysis of what their reactions might mean for my own authenticity and identity, and how they might be speaking to theoretical as well as experiential connections between these two concepts. The intention is to develop a 'reflexive ethnography' as an interweaving of perspectives of both author and subjects (Ellis, 2004).

Crucially, the interweaving of perspectives also involves a particular kind of dialogical reflexivity, in that the 'I' who is revealed in this paper is the product of conversations between myself (first author) and my colleague (second author). She is also a mature entrant to academia and 'early career scholar', and this biographical similarity supports a dialogical reflexivity which draws on the metaphor of the mirror (Finlay, 2003; Merleau-Ponty, 1968). Through the mirror, conversations with a concrete other develop into a conversation with self-as-other (Thomas and Davies, 2005), encouraging a more critical engagement with first person experience. [She] was not involved in teaching the module in question, and her relative detachment enabled a dialogical reflexivity not dissimilar to the mirroring function of the

therapist, that is, as a facilitator of my reflections. Dialogical reflexivity notwithstanding, I use the first person singular throughout this paper because, for me, the surprises and discomforts of this self-exposure require that I commit fully to the 'I' of this story.

The paper is structured around two conceptual anchors, identity and authenticity. It begins with examples from the literature on identity in general and academic identity in particular. This leads to an overview of identity work in the classroom, and the ways in which reflection on our own identity as academics requires a sustained commitment to reflexivity to bridge the gap between the institutional worlds we critique and the institutional worlds we inhabit, especially in our role as teacher-leaders.

The second anchor is the concept of authenticity and its operationalisation as 'authentic leadership' (AL). A broad distinction is drawn between 'mainstream' definitions (associated with POS and/or the use of statistically-based instruments such as questionnaires) and 'critical' definitions (tending towards qualitative rather than quantitative approaches, and more concerned with inspiring reflection than with developing models). This distinction is, of course, a gross simplification, but it helps to navigate the competing interpretations of authenticity and the various claims made for its significance for leadership.

From my autobiographical pen-portrait, it will be clear that, in my research at least, I myself lean towards critical philosophical understandings of authenticity. However, what will emerge over the course of this paper is that my own identity and authenticity work is more complex and unreliable than this positioning implies. The paper exposes and problematises this unreliability in relation to themes of identity prescription, resistance, experimentation and constructions of the 'real world', before concluding with reflections on the prospects for authenticity in management learning.

A Turn to Identity

Identity has established itself as a key construct in the social and management sciences, stimulating a 'turn to identity' in organisation studies (Alvesson et al., 2008). Research has flourished on occupational, managerial and professional identities, and the ways in which these operate within and between personal and social domains (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). Issues of selfhood have been framed in terms of identity work (Watson, 2008), identity struggle (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003), identity insecurity (Knights and Clarke, 2014) and identity undoing (Nicholson and Carroll, 2013a), focusing on how these unfold within the power

relations of institutional life, and the notion that the self is a target for regulation and control (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002).

A relatively recent development in this turn is the focus on the identity of the academic (Ford et al., 2010; Knights and Clarke, 2014). Amongst the academic identity positions that have been traced are Learmonth and Humphreys' (2011) purist versus careerist selves. The purist-self values knowledge for its own sake and sees academic work as an expression of one's moral and aesthetic concerns. The careerist-self, on the other hand, is calculating and pragmatic; this self teaches with a view to getting good feedback and writes in order to get published, both of which attract institutional approval. In a similar vein, Ford et al. (2010) discuss the idealised identity to which academics aspire as a 'hero self', bringing wisdom into the lives of lesser mortals. This version of selfhood is threatened by the demands of the administrator-self, whose energies are deployed in the service of making academic institutions tick. In making sense of their various selves, academics seem to move "swiftly between subject positions, their voices...lifting with ebullient joyfulness as they talked about research and falling into depressed cadences as they talked about administrative responsibilities" (Ford et al., 2010:78).

Of particular relevance for management learning are experiences of identity in the classroom. For instance, Ford et al. (2010) report discomfort at their own ability to move easily in and out of critical and non-critical subject positions in their teaching, as they variously don and discard their metaphorical as well as their literal business suits. Insecurities appear to flourish in development settings, creating space for identities which are sanctioned institutionally to be promoted, even compelled (Gagnon, 2008). This applies to teachers as well as students, and we should not imagine ourselves immune from the sorts of pressures faced by those we instruct (Ashcraft and Allen, 2009). Indeed, Reedy (2008) argues that identity work amongst academics and participants in development programmes is interdependent. Thus, critical self-reflection is required to explore the ways in which identities are constituted, resisted, defended and reinforced within relationships between teachers and students.

Much of this emphasis on critical self-reflection is linked to the concept of reflexivity. Cunliffe (2009) considers self- and critical-reflexivity vital to the identity of the academic as teacher. In this view, self-reflexivity involves a "dialogue-with-self about our fundamental assumptions, values, and ways of interacting" (Cunliffe, 2009:98), whereas critical-reflexivity incorporates a political dimension in examining the discourses and assumptions about the topics we teach. This work connects to a rich seam of theorisations of reflexivity in the fields of sociology and ethnography, which acknowledge both the personal and the political in the way we construct and absorb knowledge (Latour, 1988; Pollner, 1991).

Within management learning, I interpret the call for reflexivity as the need to cast a critical light on the ways in which our own identity work is intimately entangled both with that of our students, and with the demands and expectations of institution - both real and imagined. Such reflexive self-awareness is perhaps especially relevant in the context of leadership development for, in many ways, our role as teachers *is* a leadership role. Like it or not, as teacher-leaders we role-model the tussles of 'leadership'.

A Turn to Authenticity

In recent work in this space, there have been hints of a relationship between academic identity and the notion of authenticity. For instance, Cunliffe (2009) highlights the importance of reflexive self-awareness for both the teacher-leader and the authentic leader. Ford et al. (2010) consider authenticity in connection with the subject positioning of mature entrants to academia; a career in industry can lend weight to claims for legitimacy as a teacher of management studies. Humphreys (2005) invokes authenticity in relation to the mundaneity of auto-ethnographic data from academia; if something is mundane, it must be real and therefore authentic.

To date, however, connections between academic identity work and authentic leadership have been suggested, but not elaborated. That academic identity work might invoke issues of authenticity has an intuitive resonance, because the concept of authenticity is generally 'tethered' to identity (Ladkin and Spiller, 2013) and connections have been traced between authenticity, legitimacy and expertise (Goffee and Jones, 2013). Thus, authenticity may be an interesting framing for reflection on the identity struggles of the academic, particularly in relation to the authenticity of the teacher-leader.

Authenticity draws attention to who a leader *is* - whether framed in terms of identity, character, personality, or any other construct of selfhood. As theories of transformational leadership have been scrutinised for their apparent absence of morality and their problematic emphasis on charisma (Tourish, 2013; Yukl, 1999), authentic leadership has gained traction as a powerful alternative (Bass and Steidlmeier, 2004). Authentic leaders are said to be self-aware and self-regulating individuals, whose beliefs and behaviours are anchored by a commitment to their 'true self' (Avolio and Gardner, 2005). They role-model their personal convictions, maintaining consistency between inward beliefs and outward behaviours. From this 'mainstream' perspective, AL's core features have been encapsulated in the Authentic Leadership Questionnaire (ALQ) (Walumbwa et al., 2008). This defines AL as comprising four dimensions

- self-awareness, relational transparency, balanced processing and an internalised moral perspective.[i]

AL has been associated with a range of organisational benefits, including job performance (Walumbwa et al., 2008), openness of organisational culture (Hoy and Henderson, 1983) and increased employee commitment (Jensen and Luthans, 2006). For leaders, AL is associated with enhanced psychological well-being (Toor and Ofori, 2009) and sense of ethical purpose (Walumbwa et al., 2008). Indeed, so much faith is placed in authenticity that it is posited as the root for all positive forms of leadership, including transformational, charismatic, servant and spiritual approaches (Avolio and Gardner, 2005).

From a more 'critical' perspective, AL's construction of the self is the subject of critique (Ladkin and Spiller, 2013; Shaw, 2010). 'Mainstream' AL tends to see the person as self-contained and self-controlled - a master of one's own reactions and of how these are presented to others. This view emphasises relatively stable character traits, clustered around a sense of psychological centredness - the anchor of the 'true self'. In post-modern conceptions of selfhood, however, the self is seen as fluid and contingent. Thus, there is no single core self for authenticity to be true to (Guignon, 2004).

Instead, critical AL scholars invoke a model of selfhood which unfolds and evolves in relationship with the world and with others. For instance, Nicholson and Carroll (2013b) discuss authenticity as a social value, emphasising the role of dialogue in making sense of who we are. Taylor (2013) focuses on the vulnerability and self-exposure of authenticity, which necessarily unfurl within the context of relationship. Ford and Harding (2011) suggest that authenticity is invoked in intersubjective recognition and the ongoing negotiation between self and other. Thus, critical reflections on AL continue to see authenticity as 'tethered' to issues of identity, but these are viewed as intersubjective and fluid, rather than solipsistic or static.

Pulling these threads together, this paper is located at the intersection of the 'turns' to identity and authenticity. Theoretically, my instincts towards these two anchors are consistent in that I see both as characterised by instability and contingency, rather than encapsulation and reification. However, it feels important to emphasise that the connections between authentic leadership and academic identity might not have emerged had it not been for the fact (a) that the module I was teaching was about 'authentic leadership', and (b) that it consisted of a mix of 'mainstream' and more 'critical' elements, drawing on the breadth of AL definitions outlined in the literature review above (see Appendix A). It is the students' reactions to the content and

approach of this module - and to me as teacher-leader - that ground this paper in the interstices of academic identity and authenticity.

Prescribed and Sanctioned Identities

Several of the students I interviewed explicitly mentioned the notion of identity in their critique of the module. They disliked the way in which AL felt like a prescription for identity, because this made them feel as if they were being preached at. The thrust of this is captured in a discussion with Charles (a pseudonym):

> *Charles: "I really disliked the whole idea of this course. No offense! [laughs] It seemed like we moved away from business and um...leadership...and into something else."*
> *Interviewer: "Something else?"*
> *Charles: "Yeah, not sure what...Some kind of moral preaching. I kind of resented that."*
> *Interviewer: "So, you said you resented being preached at?"*
> *Charles: "Yeah. Yeah."*
> *Interviewer: "And this wasn't the case on other modules?"*
> *Charles [long pause]: "Perhaps...I mean there was a bit of that on...what was it called, 'Business ethics'? 'Ethical leadership'? But that was different, I guess. I mean, you can <u>do</u> ethics without having to believe in it! Don't tell anyone! [laughs] But I don't think you can <u>do</u> authenticity in that sense."*

Initially, I interpreted this and other similar reactions specifically in relation to the AL construct. I reflected on how it was not all that surprising that AL might stimulate a different kind of response from those topics with a more 'doing' flavour (such as the Research Methods course I had taught for the same group of students). If identity issues were being invoked in the context of pre-determined items on a questionnaire, it was perhaps to be expected that some students would react against being told who they were supposed to be.

I connected these reflections with the critique from existentialist scholars who argue that AL's fundamental flaw is that it relies on the dimensions of authenticity being defined by someone else. As Lawler and Ashman (2012:337) suggest, the "values imposed by others are necessarily alienating". From an existentialist perspective, authenticity has to be grasped as a personal project, even whilst it unfolds within the relational context of our engagements with the world. If authenticity is packaged into a questionnaire, it assumes the normative status of

'best practice', which takes us away from, rather than towards, authenticity in an existentialist sense (Tomkins and Simpson, 2015).

From this perspective, the prescribing and packaging of 'leadership' itself may be problematic, in that *any* codification of experience into a framework or model would compromise a person's efforts to develop his/her own stance towards the world and its possibilities. Models and templates imply a pre-determined solution to the leadership problem, and thereby undermine a person's ongoing efforts to work on his/her own way of dealing with the challenges of seniority, responsibility and relationships within the workplace. There is a special irony, of course, in the idea that the template for AL (of all things) might encourage us away from, rather than towards, authenticity in this philosophical sense.

Over time, however, I moved beyond such theoretical reflections about what the students' reactions said about AL, and towards more critically reflexive considerations about what they might also be saying about my own relationship with authenticity. I started to wonder whether it was not just the students who did not enjoy having their identity prescribed and sanctioned for them. Perhaps what the students were also picking up was a certain discomfort on my part with having to deliver this teaching in this particular way.

In my willingness to teach this module, which included definitions of AL with which I had little affinity, I seemed to be bracketing my purist-self to perform the role of administrator-self. This meant approaching the task with the criterion of efficiency and a desire to help keep the institutional 'show on the road'. As I reflect back, I think the residual influence of corporate demands not to be seen as 'difficult' allowed me to suppress my distaste for using authenticity as a leadership template. I did not want to 'rock the boat' by being one of those academics who departmental heads consider 'stroppy' or 'precious' when they refuse to teach a course which is incongruent with their research orientations.

In the university in question, great store was placed in the notion of 'consistency of student experience'. This idea was used to explain the need for every teacher to focus on meeting these (and only these) learning objectives, cover this (and only this) content, and thereby create the same 'student experience', irrespective of who was teaching a session and during which academic year. This emphasis on consistency originated because several undergraduate courses were attended by hundreds of students (and therefore taught by different teachers in parallel seminars), but it had spread to courses with fewer students, too (such as this MBA). Consistency had become synonymous with quality, and was justified in terms of pedagogic fairness.

Challenging this instruction to deliver consistency would have been difficult, because the sanctioned identity of the academic - the 'perfect employee' of the business school - is surely the efficient, agreeable professional rather than the stroppy plaintiff. The echoes of my corporate career make the 'perfect employee' and its close relation, the 'good corporate citizen', very poignant, particularly in combination with the label of 'early career scholar', aware of my position on a low(ish) rung of the academic ladder.

Indeed, I think identity work is especially complex for those of us who are both mature entrants to academia and 'early career scholars', i.e., both experienced and inexperienced. Drawing on Harter's (2012) developmental view of authenticity, I wonder whether this particular combination of subject positions is akin to that of the adolescent, who *both* wants to be independent, speak his/her own mind and prove what he/she is capable of *and* faces constant reminders from the world that he/she is not yet a full member of the adult club. If adolescence is a cauldron for authenticity struggle (Harter, 2012), involving honing and questioning of one's opinions and instincts, then this might be a vivid metaphor for the identity and authenticity ambivalences of the mature entrant/'early career scholar'. Just as school is a stage on which the drama of adolescent authenticity is enacted (Harter et al., 1997), so the business school may be providing a similar stage for the dramas of academic maturation.

Resistance and Compliance

Despite attempts at 'good corporate citizenship', I think my ambivalence towards AL leaked out in ways that contributed to the students' dislike of this module. I wonder whether they were detecting a certain disengagement on my part, despite my sense of professionalism at the time. The academic literature would probably consider such disengagement as a form of 'resistance', whereby resistance is a banner heading for a range of active and passive behaviours, encompassing hostility, disobedience, cynicism, avoidance and withdrawal (Gabriel, 1999). I also wonder whether interpretations of resistance may be especially prone to displacement and projection; for quite some time, I interpreted the students' interviews in terms of *their* resistance to AL, rather than something which exposed aspects of my *own* resistance...and/or lack thereof.

Many of the most vibrant discussions of authenticity see resistance at the very heart of the concept (Guignon, 2004), with dilemmas of resistance/compliance thereby core to the notion of authentic leadership (Costas and Taheri, 2012). Indeed, the nature of authentic resistance provides one of the sharpest dividing lines between 'mainstream' and 'critical' approaches to

AL. The 'mainstream' image of the authentic individual resisting the forces that might corrupt is replaced in the 'critical' literature by a view of authenticity as intimately and inescapably entangled in the ambivalences of control and complicity, and crucially dependent on biographical, social and political context (Ladkin and Spiller, 2013). In this view, it becomes much harder to make clean, unequivocal distinctions between resistance and its alternatives. The resistance of authenticity may seem like opposition or rebellion from one angle and accommodation or withdrawal from another.

An interesting aspect of the resistance of authenticity is the notion of voice. Earlier I suggested that the mature entrant/'early career scholar' might be seen as a troubled adolescent, with authenticity struggle as a framing for the drama of maturation. The difficulties of adolescence involve the tendency - especially amongst girls - not to speak up for what one really thinks, feels or believes (Harter, 2012). Finding one's voice and overcoming gendered expectations about how 'feminine' it is to speak up are thus important markers of authenticity struggle. To speak up about my difficulties with this module would have involved overcoming gendered associations with acquiescence, as well as discourses of 'good corporate citizenship'.

Gardiner (2011) urges a multi-faceted engagement with the notion of voice in authenticity. For Gardiner's subjects, afraid of the possibility of attack if they spoke out and betrayed themselves by their own accents, authenticity is sometimes to be traced in the decision to keep quiet, for "silences...have a revelatory quality for our understanding of authenticity" (Gardiner, 2011:103). Thus, choices over whether to stay quiet or speak up have a connection with authenticity which is contingent on one's place in the world, and the personal, societal and institutional politics influencing that place.

Perhaps it is no wonder that we usually protect ourselves from the fact and implications of our inclination to go with the flow of institutional life. I admit to a huge temptation to interpret my behaviour as an authenticity of pragmatism (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2013), an authenticity of silence (Gardiner, 2011), an authenticity of counter-resistance (Kärreman and Alvesson, 2009), or an authenticity of self-preservation (Costas and Fleming, 2009). I can also interpret my apparent disengagement in the classroom in terms of the rhetoric of experiential learning, whereby teachers can lapse into a 'laissez faire' approach for fear of disturbing students' own sense-making (Tomkins and Ulus, 2016). In short, I increasingly think that academic identity work may be a space for vibrant self-deception, because we have access to arguments that justify all sorts of behaviour if we need them to; and moreover, that deconstructing this power and urge to justify might just be a crucial aspect of one's own authenticity work.

Spaces for Experimentation

One of the most startling ideas in the student interviews was that their dislike of this module seemed to shore up their adherence to more traditional, functionalist leadership approaches. Even though much of the module was based on 'mainstream' definitions of AL (Appendix A), there seems to have been enough of a sense of alternativeness to trigger a dislike of reflective and experiential approaches in general:

> Joanne: "It completely pushed me over the edge! I mean, I kind of went with it when we had to do those reflective diaries, was that what they were called? Even though I couldn't help thinking it was a waste of time. But with authentic leadership, that was too much! Just too much! [laughs]"

Ashraf had been contemplating doing his MBA dissertation on a topic related to ethical leadership, but his dislike of AL has contributed to a change of heart, provoking a rejection of all the subjects perceived as 'soft' (which I interpret as a generic term for non-rigorous, often meaning non-scientific):

> Ashraf: "Can't wait to get back to economics now! A proper subject after all this soft stuff!"
> Interviewer: "But you said you were thinking of doing something with ethics?"
> Ashraf: "Yeah, yeah, but not any more! Not likely! [laughs]"

My initial readings of passages like these focused on the students' apparent allowance for experimentation, dovetailing with the literature on the importance of experimentation in management learning (Petriglieri et al., 2011). I reflected on the significance of the notion that students have some sort of allowance for trialling new ideas or approaches, and that course designers should therefore try to use this 'window' wisely. These students had come into the MBA prepared to experiment a little, but if a topic does not chime, the shutters come down and they retreat into more functionalist, more traditional subject areas.

Harter (2012) suggests a fundamental connection between experimentation and authenticity, positing that the testing of various self-representations is a central feature of the adolescent struggle for an authentic sense of self. In this view, experimentation highlights the inherent instability of subject positions, creating anxiety and doubt about which might come closest to one's 'true self'. As she elaborates, a further difficulty may be that "experimentation with one's self-presentation across roles may be identified as hypocrisy by peers and thus met with

derision" (Harter, 2012:332). Thus, the experimentation of authenticity can be fraught both personally and interpersonally.

Over time, I have come to believe that I was experimenting, too. Although my instincts were sceptical towards the packaging of leadership into AL, this was my intuition rather than a definitive, confident stance. Like an awkward adolescent, my views and opinions do ebb and flow in terms of their certainty and stability.   I think I hoped I might be able to 'teach myself into' the topic. After all, my most enjoyable teaching experiences have provided an opportunity to explore my own uncertainties - my own 'blind-spots' - in a less threatening space than many other academic conversations.   As Cortese (2005:108) suggests, "unlike learning through experience, learning through teaching involves the presence of a 'third element' (the pupil) who intervenes in the relationship between oneself and one's own way of being and of acting within the organization".

For both the students and myself, when our limits for experimentation were reached, there was a retreat to the familiar. The students retreated to more functionalist models of organisation and 'proper subjects' such as economics. I retreated to familiar subject positions of 'good corporate citizen' and 'perfect employee', which had felt relatively safe and reliable (if somewhat inauthentic) in my corporate career, and were now proving popular with university managers and administrators in my new career. We had all tried to work with ideas that felt different and uncomfortable, but been unable to create a learning space in which such discomfort could be acknowledged and explored productively.

This notion of a retreat to familiarity chimes with Ford and Harding's (2011) discussion of authenticity. They suggest that the capacity to handle both familiarity and strangeness is vital to any elaboration of AL which hopes to see leader and follower as fellow subjects, rather than subject/object. From this perspective, the authenticity of the subject can emerge only in relation to others in an "intersubjective dynamic in which the other whom the self meets is also a self, a subject in his or her own right, who is different and yet alike and is capable of sharing similar mental experiences" (Ford and Harding, 2011:471). A retreat to familiarity is a denial of strangeness and a denial of the other as subject. In a sense, therefore, I was 'othering' my students in my retreat to subject positions that were safe and sanctioned. This is extremely uncomfortable to acknowledge, given warnings against 'othering' managers (Reedy, 2008) and 'mainstream' colleagues (Ford et al., 2010), and the resultant diminishing of empathy, mutual recognition and - ironically - authenticity.

The Problematic of the 'Real World'

Somewhat counter-intuitively, the familiar was also felt to be less 'real' than other spaces in which authenticity may thrive more readily. The students focused much of their critique on the notion that the module lacked credibility because it did not feel grounded in the 'real world':

> Ashraf: *"I don't want to upset anyone, 'cause I know you have different skill-sets and stuff. But I couldn't stop myself thinking, who are you to tell me about this kind of thing?! You've never been anywhere near this stuff in the real world! [laughs] Sorry, I probably shouldn't have said that."*

AL will only resonate if learning conversations are based on a shared understanding of organisational life, that is, if they involve recognition of the difficulties of authenticity when one is enmeshed in delivery-focused institutional practices and priorities. Moreover, tensions between aspiration and reality emerge in the construction of AL as 'political correctness':

> Joanne: *"It was like political correctness gone mad! No sense of what actually goes on in the real world!"*

Again, initially I interpreted these reactions specifically in relation to the AL construct. I reflected on how the students' responses seemed to reinforce authenticity as a worldly phenomenon (Bathurst and Cain, 2013) more powerfully than versions of AL which focus on immunity from situational pressures (Gardner et al., 2011) or control of self-presentation (Walumbwa et al., 2008). These students were locating the hunt for authenticity in the messy realities of their working lives, thereby reinforcing the suggestion that authenticity unfolds as struggle (Nyberg and Sveningsson, 2013). Such a view punctures the idealism of 'mainstream' AL, for if authenticity is fundamentally related to struggle and the politics of institution, it must surely be relative and contingent, not pure and absolute.

As I lingered with the data, however, I began to find it very disconcerting that the students were constructing the 'real world' as somewhere - anywhere - other than here in the classroom with me. The students' sense that the classroom was the space for anodyne 'political correctness' rather than honest engagement with the challenges of their working lives struck me especially forcibly because of my own identity as a mature entrant to academia. As someone who had 'been there, done that' in corporate life, surely the students could not be referring to *me* when they criticised the module and/or its teachers?! I *knew* these students, and had thought they

knew *me*! Had I not established my credentials as someone with a track record in industry who could therefore still make claims to belonging to the 'real world'?!

These reflections illuminate my tendency to stake a claim to a certain kind of credibility from having 'been there' (Ford et al., 2010). Perhaps I use my track record in corporate life as a shield against criticism in the classroom, and as a way of counterbalancing the insignificant 'early career scholar' with a more impressive 'corporate leader'. However, by relying on what has happened 'over there', in the 'real world', and in the past, rather than on what is happening 'in here', in the classroom, and in the present, I both contributed to these students' discomfort with the module and revealed some of my own.

Thus, there was a collective sense that this was not an authentic space. The students preserved a sense of the relevance of authenticity for their own 'real worlds', whilst I drew on my identity as a corporate practitioner and efficient course deliverer to survive this teaching and preserve the notion of authenticity for my research. Despite my theoretical allegiance with arguments for authenticity as the concrete particular rather than the abstract universal (Lawler and Ashman, 2012), I had only partially engaged with the concrete particular of the classroom. In short, this learning space was one in which the desire for authenticity was crowded out by the dynamics of identity sanction, strategies of coping and self-deception, a retreat to familiarity, and a displacement of authenticity to places other than this - whence the title of this paper - make me authentic, but not here.

Prospects for Authenticity in Academia

The theoretical contribution of this paper is to elaborate parallels between academic identity work and authentic leadership, and the ways in which both identity and authenticity unfurl in our relationships with others, both real and imagined, both institutional and interpersonal. As Ladkin and Spiller (2013) suggest, the core debates in the critical literature on AL concern the nature of the self and issues of performance, pragmatism, idealism, power, presence and relationality. If one were summarising the contemporary critical view of identity - academic identity, in particular - one might draw up a very similar list. Authenticity work and identity work have so much in common that the two bodies of literature on AL and academic identity would benefit from greater cross-fertilisation in future research.

Developing the concept of the teacher-leader might be one way to enhance our understanding of the parallels between academic identity and authentic leadership traced in this paper. There is a vibrant literature in primary and secondary education where the teacher-leader is one

whose sphere of influence operates both within and beyond the classroom, without having a formally appointed leadership position (Barth, 2004; York-Barr and Duke, 2004). Indeed, Lambert (2003:422) addresses many of the dilemmas of authenticity in suggesting that teacher-leaders "know themselves and their intentions enough so that they are not intimidated into silence by others. They are open to learning and understand the major dimensions of learning in schools: the learning of students, learning of colleagues, learning of self, learning of the community."

I might not have seen these connections if I had remained working at a purely theoretical level. It is only through the increasing reflexivity of this analysis that I have become aware of the hideous ironies of my own identity and authenticity work. By attempting a "self-conscious relation with 'self as other' and with the subject positions offered in discourse" (Thomas and Davies, 2005: 687), I now believe that two types of packaging have taken me away from the authenticity that I write about in my research - the packaging of authenticity into AL and the packaging of me into the 'perfect employee', 'good corporate citizen', 'mature entrant' and 'early career scholar'. It is quite shocking to acknowledge the difficulties of my own authenticity work, and only slightly reassuring to see others also admitting to finding academia more challenging than they had imagined it would be from the corporate side of the fence (Learmonth and Humphreys, 2011).

For many of us, it seems, the classroom is not the place for "the activist wing of CMS" (Reedy, 2008:62). In principle, management learning ought to be where we have the greatest opportunity to influence corporate practitioners to be more critically reflexive about the interweaving of power and subjectivity in their organisational worlds. In practice, however, what we bring to these learning spaces is our own issues of power and subjectivity which, if unacknowledged or underestimated, mean that we can role-model compliance with subject positions of 'good corporate citizenship' and try to suppress any niggling feelings that things are not quite right. Framing these issues in terms of *authenticity* is perhaps one way of alerting ourselves to the risk and implications of role-modelling this kind of 'leadership'.

When I taught this module, I took it for granted that I could not refuse to teach it (for fear of letting colleagues down, as well as gaining the 'stroppy' label and using up valuable energy on battles I could not win). Nor could I secretly teach it differently from how it appeared on the module specification once the classroom doors were closed (for fear of compromising 'consistency of student experience', as well as a Kafkaesque fear of being caught out). The risks associated with taking a personal stance against what I felt was probably (but not definitely) a poorly-conceived module would have been enormous, in my imagination at least.

It is disconcerting to realise how much I seem to have absorbed the challenge of an excessive workload as a personal problem for me to solve. I must have felt that it was my responsibility to do everything possible to manage my energy levels so that I could preserve some time and space for research, and that if I did not manage this, I would have had my poor 'time management' skills to blame. Spicer (2011) argues that such individualised responsibility is part of the contemporary 'authenticity trap', which nurtures an idealised notion of self and inevitably creates guilt that we have never managed to be good enough. As Spicer (2011:48) explains, "instead of personal authenticity connecting an individual with broader 'ideals' which are shared in a society, it pushes an individual back onto themselves". From this perspective, having 'authentic leadership' on the curriculum might be seen as a form of identity regulation (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002), for academics and students alike. The rhetoric of authenticity as an idealised project of selfhood seems to foster organisational conditions in which it is especially difficult to break out of the 'trap' of self-management and start holding our institutions to account.

So, how might we try to influence university management to foster more satisfying student and academic experiences? It feels naïve to suggest this, but surely part of the problem is that many academics are simply too busy? If our workloads were not so crowded, we might have space to actually *enjoy* teaching, rather than feeling that the only sensible thing to do is get through it as efficiently and painlessly as possible in order to preserve a smidgeon of energy for research. Despite the impression I have probably created in this paper, I do actually *like* teaching. What I do not like is having to teach when I am so exhausted I can barely stand up; when students are asked for feedback in such a way that it reinforces their subject position as consumer; and when the curriculum consists of topics that are fashionable, with high ideological appeal and an implicit promise of delivering The Solution to whatever problems present. This does not feel like an environment in which any sort of authentic leadership is going to flourish.

With the benefit of reflexive hindsight, it is not surprising that it should be specifically with AL that these dilemmas emerged, because AL is arguably the most fashionable, promise-laden topic currently on the business school curriculum (Nyberg and Sveningsson, 2013). If authenticity carries an imperative for political action (Guignon, 2004), then its politics are grounded in the institutions of academia as well as the corporate settings with which we more usually associate the notion of 'leadership'. We should not, therefore, be surprised to find AL evoking various intermingled forms of resistance, compliance and coping, and various

emotional fusions of anxiety, frustration and cynicism, amongst *all* the institutional players who are exposed to it.

Some commentators suggest that authenticity might be introduced into leadership development without using the AL label (Cooper et al., 2005; Shaw, 2010). If we do use this label, I think we have to pay more explicit attention to its political and ideological dynamics. We could work with students on questions such as: Why is AL so popular with curriculum designers, if what we are experiencing here in the classroom is aversion to its preaching tone? Why do we keep hankering after recipes for leadership? Why does it feel so crucial for both teachers and students to establish their 'real world' credentials, and to resist 'softness' in discussions or performances of leadership? Such questions might enable discussion of the unattractive aspects of the authenticity discourse and the siren-call of self-fulfilment in the 'authenticity trap'. But they are not easy questions, and it would take time, space and institutional support for us to take such risks with personal disclosure.

Because of the wide range of definitions of AL, I think the course design we followed (Appendix A) created particular challenges. This combination of models, tools, reflection and discussion was undoubtedly an attempt to be integrative, that is, to allow space for both 'mainstream' and 'critical' sensibilities and both theoretical and experiential approaches. However, I now think this combination of potentially incompatible elements (unproblematised *as* such a combination) created too much muddle for students and teachers alike. If the ontological and epistemological foundations of a particular course are as varied as they were here, I think we have to create space to surface this and discuss its implications with our students, without resorting to the inaccessible language of ontology and epistemology.

One possibility is that we might avoid teaching 'mainstream', functionalist AL, i.e., if authenticity is invoked in connection with leadership, it could be an explicitly critical, reflective approach which does not rely on tools such as the ALQ. As a result of my experiences here, I now try to avoid not only the ALQ, but all instruments of self-encapsulation full-stop. Asking students to complete questionnaires feels easy and fun; it is a good time-filler; it supports the discourse of 'consistency of student experience'; and it has a quasi-scientific rigour. But how can we write about the philosophical absurdity of converting human experience into a checklist and expecting it to emerge as ethical or compassionate or authentic leadership, whilst going along with precisely this checklistification in our teaching? I draw only a little comfort from the existentialist argument that confronting one's own inauthenticity is an inescapable element of the authenticity journey (Tomkins and Simpson, 2015).

Webs As Yet Unspun

This paper has evolved in unexpected ways, and the story presented here is not the only one which could have been told. This is a reminder that authenticity is at stake in narrative (Shamir and Eilam, 2005; Sparrowe, 2005), where people spin "an authentic living story web when they integrate their past experiences, their future expectations, and their own potentiality for being a whole-Self while deconstructing their inauthentic selves" (Boje et al., 2013:272). Such living stories are not comprehensive factual accounts, and I have highlighted some aspects of my own politics of identity and authenticity at the expense of others.

For instance, the students' laughter suggests they felt the need to temper their criticisms of the module and its teachers. Also, the fact that only a handful of students were prepared to be interviewed implies unease amongst subject positions of 'good student', 'student as consumer' and 'honest research participant'. And of course, these particular students may or may not have held views that were representative of the class as a whole. As I outlined at the start, I have not used their data to present a formal thematic synthesis, but rather, to bring to life the notion that this reflexive auto-ethnography has emerged in and through relationship.

It is worth clarifying that I did not teach this module alone, and that my two co-teachers (Appendix A) did not want to be involved in any further investigations. A different story could well have been spun if the three of us had worked together to explore our identity struggles both inside and outside the classroom in the university in question. Instead, the relative detachment of a colleague (second author) who was *not* involved in this teaching has perhaps enabled a suspension of the defensiveness and/or competitiveness that can be felt amongst colleagues who work together, but may be reflecting separately on issues of performance, coping and compromise. However, it has not been easy to work with this dialogical reflexivity to develop and present this sense of self-as-other (Thomas and Davies, 2005), because the enhanced visibility of the one who looks into the mirror creates a certain invisibility for the one behind the mirror, and leaves a great deal of the reflexive experience tacit (Finlay, 2003).

This paper is also relatively quiet on gender. In reflecting on the academic as adolescent, I referred to Harter's (2012) proposition and Gardiner's (2011) implication that this might be especially relevant to women. There is more to be said about how perceptions of authenticity depend on whether leaders conform to gendered expectations (Eagly, 2005; Liu et al., 2015), and how gender may shape and reproduce academic identities (Harris et al., 1998). Gender may well expose further contradictions at the heart of the AL construct. For instance, authenticity carries masculine connotations in connection with the Enlightenment's rational

subject (Gardiner, 2011), and it can also be feminine, especially when the discourses of authentic and caring leadership are interwoven (Tomkins and Simpson, 2015).

Relatedly, I have not explored the corporeality of these teaching, learning and research experiences. This would provide an interesting focus for future research, given depictions of AL as an embodied phenomenon (Guthey and Jackson, 2005; Taylor, 2013) and of management learning as the space for embodied encounters (Tomkins and Ulus, 2016). A starting point might be the proposition that the problems with both the packaging of authenticity into AL and the packaging of me into the 'good corporate citizen' arise directly from the absence of the body; for any sort of packaging surely privileges abstraction and sanitisation over the viscera of affective, corporeal and heart-felt experience.

Concluding Thoughts

I have often heard it said that AL is a great topic to teach, because it is based on current, not outdated, research; it is popular with students; it invokes the nicer qualities of human beings; and it is easy to teach because it invites illustrations from personal experience, not necessarily requiring a track-record in corporate leadership. For me, however, teaching AL has exposed some extremely uncomfortable things about my attitudes towards authority, ambition and self-preservation, and the ways in which these unfurl in my relationships with other people, not least my students.

Nevertheless, I remain hopeful that authenticity can play some sort of role in the business school and in the working lives of institutional leaders. As Guignon (2004:161-162) suggests:

> "One crucial reason why we value authenticity is because we believe that being authentic plays a fundamental role in nurturing and sustaining the kind of society in which something like authenticity as an ideal can be possible...To be fully authentic is to recognize the need to be constantly vigilant in one's society, to be engaged in political action aimed at preserving and reinforcing a way of life that allows for such worthy personal life projects as that of authenticity...The authentic individual cannot be thought of as someone who is simply reflective and candid in acting in the world. Such a person must also be attentive to what is going on in the political arena."

If we are to be thought of as teacher-leaders, then going along with what we sense might be 'bad teaching' is more than just a minor, short-term irritation in our busy working lives. It raises the question of the authenticity of our passions and commitments, and the extraordinary

potential for hypocrisy in our work. The very things we are supposed to be teaching our students are the things that are tripping us up. If we want a world in which institutional leaders at least attempt to blend achievement, ethics, values and authenticity, then somewhere in the political arena of the identity projects of academia, we have to do a better leadership job ourselves.

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Appendix A: The AL Module

The module was six weeks long, with two hours face-to-face time each week. It was one of several on the topic of leadership, alongside leadership in the public sector, leadership of change, and ethical leadership. The module was not formally assessed, but AL was one of the topics students could choose to develop further in their final assessed dissertation. We had 23 mature, part-time students - a mix of British nationals and foreign students - all of whom I had taught previously. I taught the module with two colleagues. The module had been running for two years when we inherited it, and none of us had been involved in the module design. We delivered the opening session together (week one), and divided up responsibility for teaching subsequent sessions. I took the lead for the final component (weeks five and six).

Weeks one and two were based largely on 'mainstream' AL theory, emphasising the importance of articulating personal values; consistency between those values and behaviour; links with theories of transformational leadership; and the notion of being true to oneself.

In weeks three and four, students were asked to rate themselves against criteria in a leadership inventory. This asked both how they saw themselves at the present time and how they would like to be in the future. It was loosely based on the ALQ, but with the dimensions re-worded slightly for a UK audience into (a) Self-awareness (b) Openness and transparency (c) Considering all the angles (d) Ethics – e.g.,
(a) Self-awareness: I have a good understanding of my strengths and limitations as a leader
(b) Openness and transparency: I openly share issues and challenges with my subordinates
(c) Considering all the angles: Even if I feel sure of something, I take time to consult others
(d) Ethics: My behaviour at work is guided by my personal values and beliefs

In weeks five and six, students were asked to think about a specific instance in their own experience which either reflected what they saw as their authentic responses and behaviours, or represented a failure to achieve such authentic responses and behaviours. They were asked to complete an individual, written assignment in between weeks five and six. During the final session, there was a structured debrief, where students were invited, but not compelled, to share their stories with the group. From memory, most of the students shared at least some of their story. They were encouraged to reflect on any common themes amongst the stories, as well as any interesting points of departure. The final summary session attempted to link these themes back to the theory that had been presented at the start of the module.

i Some of the statistical evidence in support of the ALQ has recently been challenged, and a number of papers from well-known AL theorists retracted - see www.retractionwatch.com. However, there are other examples of questionnaire-based work on AL which do not appear to suffer from these issues (e.g., Beddoes-Jones and Swailes, 2015).