

‘Letters to an early career academic’: learning from the advice of the physical education and sport pedagogy professoriate

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Abstract

Taking our lead from Rilke’s *Letters to a Young Poet*, this project represents our attempt to stimulate dialogue between 30 physical education and sport pedagogy (PESP) early career academics (ECAs) and 11 PESP professors. First, the ECAs were invited to write a narrative around their experiences as PESP ECAs. Second, a narrative analysis was undertaken and three composite ECA letters were constructed. Third, these letters were shared with the professoriate, who were each invited to write a letter of response. Finally, six of the professors participated in a symposium, which focused on the letters. The professors’ letters and the transcripts of the symposium constitute the dataset for this paper. While the larger project engages with ECA voices this paper focuses on how the professors construct the university and PESP and the implications of these constructions for how they advise and mentor ECAs. Theoretically, we recruit the work of Pierre Bourdieu, and nascent ideas about mentoring, to challenge our interpretive complacency, and help us think in generative ways about the data. Our analysis engages with three broad themes: constructions of the university; constructions of PESP; and constructions of self. Findings suggest that while much of the professorial advice might be interpreted as targeted towards the development of more accomplished neoliberal subjects, there was some evidence of a more radical, collegial mentoring of sorts, through advice that foregrounded strategies of resistance.

Keywords: *Early Career, Narrative, Neoliberal University, Mentoring, Bourdieu*

Introduction

In the century since its publication, Rainer Maria Rilke's classic *Letters to a Young Poet*, has proved timeless and offered insight and sage advice to countless human beings. The story behind the letters is simple. A 19-year-old cadet and budding poet Franz Xaver Kappus is trying to choose between a career in the Austro-Hungarian Army and a literary career. He writes to the established Bohemian-Austrian poet Rilke, enclosing some poetry of his own and asking for advice. This begins a sporadic correspondence—10 letters from Rilke over 6 years—that were ultimately compiled and published by Kappus in 1929. The freshness of the letters now might be attributed to Rilke's ability to turn his illuminating gaze on the questions that trouble Kappus, and provide enduring ideas on how to embrace uncertainty. The durability of the letters is also attributable to the popularity of the theme that underscores the correspondence and captures the nature of the sustained relationship between Rilke and Kappus, that is, mentoring.

The story behind the project from which this paper comes is also simple and serendipitous. One of the authors was reading Rilke's letters and at the same time invited to consider how early career academics (ECAs) might be better mentored in the physical education and sport pedagogy (PESP) field of inquiry. It was in this context that the idea to construct a project inspired by Rilke's letters and targeted at promoting intergenerational dialogue in the field emerged. We (the ECA authors of this paper) saw 'The Letters Project' as an opportunity to stimulate intergenerational dialogue about ECA experiences, career development and mentoring. While other publications from the project explore PESP ECAs' experiences of being and becoming academics in the neoliberal university (Alfrey, Enright, & Rynne, 2016), and methodological considerations associated with the research project (Rynne, Enright, & Alfrey, 2016), in this paper we engage with the responses of 11 of the PESP professoriate to questions raised and issues identified by 30 PESP ECAs. The specific focus of the paper is on how the professors construct the university and PESP, and the implications of these constructions for how they advise and mentor ECAs.

Mentoring in the neoliberal university

Mentoring has long been part of academic life, as experienced academics have always advised, guided and supported postgraduate students in the development of their research (Delamont, Atkinson, & Parry, 2000). It is not difficult to find literature that attests to the benefits of solid mentoring relationships for academics in higher education (Ehrich, Hansford, & Tennent, 2004 for a meta-review). ECAs have noted, for example, that the most salient benefits of good mentoring are: stronger commitment to their career and the field, increased scholarly productivity, higher rates of job and career satisfaction, achieving tenure and promotion, and better adjustment to the department, institution and job (Johnson, 2007). While these mentoring relationships can be of the formal structured variety and involve a primary mentor within one's discipline or faculty and/or comprised of engagement with multiple 'mentors of the moment' (De Janasz & Sullivan, 2004), what seems to matter most is that ECAs have access to collegial support and their socialisation into the academy is actively facilitated (Adcroft & Taylor, 2013).

Outside of the literature on mentoring, the academic socialisation literature is equally effusive about the value of appropriate advice from significant people (Gardner, 2008). While socialisation is clearly an ongoing process, and not the result of occasional events, the importance of observing, listening to and interacting with senior scholars in the field and colleagues in their schools and universities has been highlighted by numerous scholars as an important aspect of the socialisation process (Boden, Borrego, & Newswander, 2011; Lawson, 1991). Moreover, ECA participants in a multitude of studies (e.g. Baker & Lattuca, 2010; Gardner, 2010) argue that the process of navigating the maze of unfamiliar rules and regulations, coming to know their way around a new discipline, and finding their feet within their school, university and field of inquiry, can be both accelerated and enhanced with the guidance of 'Professor Right' (Bell & Treleaven, 2011). What 'Professor Right' might look like is, of course, contentious, but the literature suggests that many ECAs perceive that the best guidance and advice comes from experts in their own field of inquiry, who understand the history of the field, are respected and powerfully networked within the field, and have strong visions for the future of the field (Austin & McDaniels, 2006; Gardner, 2008).

The literature also suggests, however, that where mentoring of academics was once an important part of the process of enhancing teaching and learning in higher education, over the past

decade it has increasingly assumed an auditing function. Scholars have argued, for example, that in many contexts mentors are now agents of the institution charged with enhancing their mentees' productivity and bringing them in line with universities strategic priorities (Buchanan, Gordon, & Schuck, 2008; Devos, 2007). This idea of mentors as perpetuators of neoliberal logics is hugely problematic, given that the neoliberal university requires, amongst other things, high productivity in accelerated time frames (Mountz et al., 2015), and dealing with the associated and considerable embodied effects of these compressed timelines is often what academics, especially ECAs (Alfrey et al., 2016), want advice on. A small, but growing body of literature articulates a need for radical, feminist mentoring. Radical mentoring in the neoliberal university is thought to require the development of 'new' and quite specific strategies of resistance that are underpinned by a feminist ethics of care and foreground collaborative and collective progression by both mentors and mentees (Mountz et al., 2015). The scholars, who advocate this approach, also argue for greater empirical work and theorisation around academic socialisation and the social reproduction of academic knowledge in and through the neoliberal university (Davies & Bansel, 2010). This is research ground traversed by the French sociologist, anthropologist and philosopher Pierre Bourdieu in the 1980s, albeit before universities underwent significant neoliberal restructuring.

Homo academicus

Bourdieu (1988) constructed the most sustained sociology and anthropology of academic culture. His analysis, while focusing on academics and academic institutions in France, has much wider relevance as it offers generative ways of approaching the social reproduction of academic knowledge (Delamont et al., 2000). Bourdieu viewed the academy as preoccupied with the classificatory ordering of knowledge and culture, principles of hierarchy and the differential distribution of status. In *Homo academicus* Bourdieu (1988) reflects on the processes whereby bodies of knowledge are reproduced through recruitment and training. Most pertinent, considering the subject matter of this paper, is that, for Bourdieu, progressing in the academy is dependent on inherited forms of social capital and the investment of time in the acquisition of specific forms of cultural capital.

According to Bourdieu acquiring cultural capital in any academic discipline is a lengthy process; protracted apprenticeships are usually a prerequisite for the cultural learning required to succeed and progress. Moreover, while there are many generic themes that run through any discussion of academic socialisation, Bourdieu argues that disciplinary socialisation has a degree of specificity associated with it. A discipline, of course, can mean many things. We understand discipline as a field of academic specialisation (Delamont et al., 2000), and the field of academic specialisation that concerns us most in this paper is PESP.

In Bourdieu (1993) terms, fields are the various social and institutional arenas which people inhabit. They are constituted by relationships and practices through which certain values and beliefs are produced and reproduced by the actions of people who maintain the relationships within the field. Fields, therefore, must be understood and analysed relationally (Bourdieu, 1993). We should highlight here, that fields often overlap and the rules and structures of one field come to influence those of another. What holds global, complex fields together, however, and makes them a useful tool to think with is what Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) call their ‘specific logic’—their own distinctive structures and dynamics, and the forms of specific capital that are valued within them.

One of the enduring themes of Bourdieu’s work is the extent to which different disciplines or fields reproduce specific forms of ‘habitus’. Bourdieu (1984) has defined habitus, in albeit rigid terms, as a ‘structuring structure, which organises practices and the perception of practices’ (p. 170). We might also think of habitus as embodied dispositions that are internalised, subconscious representations of external structures. Habitus, therefore, consists of our beliefs, interests, thoughts and understandings of the social spaces we inhabit and both generates and constitutes cultural capital. Bourdieu summarises the relationship between field and habitus as follows:

Investment in the disposition to act that is generated in the relationship between a space defined by a game offering certain prizes or stakes (what I call a field) and a system of dispositions attuned to that game (what I call a habitus)—the ‘feel’ for the game and the stakes, which implies both the inclination and the capacity to play the game, to take an interest in the game, to be taken up, taken in by the game (Bourdieu, 1993).

Playing the game, then, is less about conscious rationalisation and more about subconscious involvement and investment. Academics in a particular field are endowed with a certain ‘feel for the game’ or academic habitus, which orients their actions.

Bourdieu (1988) reminds us, however, that all academics are located in specific positions within departments and universities and their practices and points of view reflect these positions. Professor is an academic rank in the university, and usually denotes the academic position of the highest rank. That is not to diminish the significant variances between how professors are (and were historically) appointed and to what ends. Professors hold powerful positions in their field of inquiry, by virtue of their total accumulation of symbolic capital, which can be gained from any combination of cultural, social and economic capital, and their sophisticated read of the game. While different hierarchies might exist across faculties and disciplines, Lucas (2006) argues that professors are in possession of numerous forms of capital that ECAs cannot recruit, for example, capital of academic power and capital of scientific prestige. The main forms of hierarchical structure within an academic field relates to the possession of these two forms of capital. Therefore, there are very good reasons why ECAs and others might be interested in understanding how professors construct the fields in which they function.

The study

Given the inspiration for the project and our curiosity about how professors draw upon the constituents of their experience to offer advice and guidance to ECAs, narrative inquiry was deemed an appropriate methodology. Narrative inquiry constitutes ‘a study of the ways humans experience the world and is a recursive and reflexive process that allows for temporality, socialisation and place to be considered’ (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 5). Caine, Estefan, and Clandinin (2013) suggest that narrative inquiry ‘proceeds from an ontological position, a curiosity about how people are living and the constituents of their experience’ (p. 575).

Inspired by the exchange of letters between Rilke and Kappus, letter writing was the specific narrative inquiry method chosen for this study. Numerous scholars have used letter writing to explore their own and others’ lived experiences. For example, Knowles and Cole (1994) wrote letters to each other as part of a reflexive process to explore the frustrations and joys of becoming academics, and

Ciuffetelli Parker (2011) used letter writing in a teacher education programme to gain insight into pre-service teachers and teacher educators as curriculum makers. In both of these cases, the use of letters as a narrative inquiry method supported relational knowing—an enhanced appreciation and knowledge of self in relation to others.

The larger study began with an invitation to PESP ECAs to write narratives about their experiences (joys and challenges). Ultimately, 30 ECAs (13 male; 17 female) responded to the invitation. These ECA narratives were then analysed and three composite ECA letters, reflective of the joys, challenges and questions expressed in the narratives, were constructed (Molly, Emily and Jason; a full account of which can be found in Alfrey et al., 2016). Eleven PESP professors (five male; six female) from six different countries were then purposively recruited. The professors were invited to respond to the composite letters also in letter format. In keeping with the dialogue between Rilke and Kappus, each of the composite letters included specific questions, derived directly from the original ECA narrative submissions. It was made clear to the professors that it was up to them what aspect of the letters they responded to; they could choose, for example, to respond to a single letter, to the questions raised in all three letters, or to address a broad theme.

As well as the 11 letters the professors shared, 6 of the professors also participated in a symposium organised and facilitated by the ECA authors at an international PESP conference. The aim of this final data collection event was to engage in conversation about the data generated from ‘The Letters Project’ to that point (i.e. ECA composite letters and professorial responses). The symposium was audio-recorded. The letters from the 11 professors and the transcripts of the symposium constitute the dataset for this paper.

Similar to the approach initially adopted with respect to the ECA data (see Alfrey et al., 2016), the initial stage of working with the professorial data involved a thematic analysis and focused on identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The authors each read over the letters and symposium transcript several times to become familiar with the data, then identified and reviewed the constructed themes, and had a number of Skype meetings over the period of a month to review the themes and discuss initial and ongoing analyses. While this approach was valuable insofar as we were able to identify coherent, consistent and distinctive themes in the

data, we were attracted to the work of Pierre Bourdieu as it supported a level of analysis that elucidated connections between the themes and the broader social practices, relations and structures of the fields within which the participants functioned. For example, for Bourdieu analysing fields relationally means not simply considering relations between agents in the field, but also identifying and analysing the objective relations between various positions in the field (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

In the section that follows, we give account of our interpretations with regard to three distinct but interrelated themes: constructions of the university, constructions of PESP, and constructions of self. While the professors were aware we could not guarantee their anonymity owing to the public nature of the project and the size of the field of inquiry, we have chosen to assign pseudonyms here to maintain the focus on the data and specifically on what the professors voiced in the context of this project. We provide these pseudonyms, the context in which the data were generated (i.e. Letter or Symposium) together with the country where the professors are currently employed, alongside all data excerpts.

Findings

Constructions of the university

The professors' constructions of the university were broad and contradictory, and had implications for the nature of the advice they offered to the ECAs. A number of the professors noted that universities have changed significantly since they began their academic careers:

I should preface my comments with the disclosure that much of my own career was formed in a previous culture. As you know, universities have changed considerably over the past 30 years or so. The current culture of performativity and audit in which you must 'gain a toe hold for your climb' is a more difficult and demanding workplace than it was for me in my 'climb' to professor. While many (probably all) of the issues you address as troubling were also present in previous generations there is no doubt that the competition is now tougher and the 'academic game' more demanding. (Mark, Australia, Letter)

What constitutes a field, its components and boundaries are historically variable and the signifiers of worth and logics of any field will change through struggles, which define and redefine what is valuable (Bourdieu, 1993). While it was not always clear what signifiers of worth universities had shifted away from, or what kind of past the professors were nostalgic for, the professors had all been in the academy long enough to witness the ‘main game logics’ of universities changing over time.

There was general agreement that economic, rationalist, corporate and commercial policies and rationales now strongly influence university priorities, and that the neoliberal university was ‘a harder place to work’ (Sinéad, Ireland, Letter). Numerous adjectives were used by the professoriate to characterise universities. On the one hand, universities were described as ‘complex’, ‘corporatised’, ‘challenging’ and ‘restraining’ institutions; on the other, they were identified as ‘fantastic’, ‘flexible’, ‘exciting’ and ‘supportive’ workplaces. One professor captured these competing constructions particularly well, suggesting that contemporary ‘universities can appear to be schizophrenic institutions’ (Rebecca, UK, Letter).

The professors who spoke about university imperatives in logical and transparent ways offered advice consistent with their constructions. They did not tend to critique university systems and structures, but rather reminded ECAs of the external pressures universities are under, and the many ways in which universities support ECAs. The professors who were openly critical of bureaucratised and constraining university culture also offered advice consistent with their constructions. While these professors, who were notably in the minority, did not explicitly advocate resistance, they did question the instrumental priorities to which ECAs were being required to acquiesce. A spirited exchange occurred in the symposium between two professors committed to different and competing constructions of the university:

Rebecca (UK): My first feeling was that the letters seem to me to be based on a totally unrealistic view of what a university actually is. I thought there was a slightly romantic view of what a university could or should be, or you wished it was. But I thought it was slightly unrealistic, because I don’t think universities are those places, and probably haven’t been for some time. I don’t know if they

ever were. ... If your success is that you do fantastic research, which gets out there and absolutely helps the people you're researching, which I think is what you all think you want to do, I assume. In your research, I think you're doing it because you want to change things, improve lives ... Then if that's the case, the system can help you to do that ... actually the university structures—that's what they want you to do too

Kate (Australia): ... I actually think in a way [Rebecca], you're romanticising the university. I think what those young people are talking about are expectations, they're receiving information about expectations that is pretty narrow, but they're probably from senior people, even presentations at the university that are saying, if you're going to be a worthwhile person, these are the sorts of things that count.

This is what it means to be a worthwhile person in this university. (Symposium)

This exchange was just one of the many data excerpts that reminded us to consider the ways in which the various professors' investments in administrative and governance positions in their schools, faculties and universities, might be informing their advice. Rebecca held a significant governance position in in her university, whereas Kate was a Professorial Fellow in her institutions and far more loosely connected to governance. While holding administrative or governance positions does not necessarily predict investment in university structures, in many cases it might explain why certain positions might be adopted.

It should be highlighted, however, that for the majority of the professors, the perception seemed to be that 'all institutions have their pros and cons in terms of what they can offer you' (Diana, Australia), and what matters most is understanding the context. The importance of understanding or 'getting to know your university' and 'recognizing the expectations of where you work' (Sinéad, Ireland, Letter) was a consistent theme in the advice:

Get to know your workplace. Universities are complex organisations drenched with explicit and implicit expectations and ways of working often communicated with impenetrable acronyms and terminology. In Australia, if talk of ARC,

DECRA, AQF, TEQSA, MOOC, etc is a foreign language, then you will metaphorically remain a foreigner at work. (Sarah, Australia, Letter)

It is essential to understand what the mission of your university is (research-intensive or not). You can look on the website of your university but the better indicators are the support your university provides in terms of money for research, the size of the teaching load, and so on. ... remember that paddling against the current is exhausting and you don't progress quickly. (Charlie, Canada, Letter)

The message was clear. As expectations of you and your work may vary from one university to another, it is necessary to learn to identify the implicit and explicit institutional demands and performance expectations so that you can progress.

Interestingly, while some ECAs interpreted this advice as helping them to 'learn the rules of the game', a number of the professors took exception to the ECAs' frequent references to 'the game' in the composite ECA letters and at the symposium:

Sarah (Australia): I'd just like to come back to the game. It worries me, the constant reference to playing the game and I like to think that if we put out a global search for a position, what we get on the piece of paper is what we judge. We don't look at networks. We don't remember whether we've seen you at a conference or not. It's purely—this is a point [Rebecca] made—by CV. It's purely on the CV and we've always been welcoming of a gem, someone we didn't know existed ... So I understand all the reasons why the language of the game was used, but I do believe that there is—there are processes in place at most universities where your CV is taken on its merit ...

Rebecca (UK): ... it's your passport. There is no question about that. Your CV is your passport and you need to be really mindful about what goes on there, because that's usually pretty much the first thing—and remember most search systems point to ... They don't know you from anybody else ... thinking about your CV, what's on it, is really important. I did say in my letter and I'm sorry—

I'm not sorry, it is true. The first thing people do is they look at that CV and then they look at—you know all those words you spent hours writing around the CV that explains why they should employ you. Well, that comes pretty much second

Kate (Australia): Can I just respond? For me, because it actually epitomises exactly what the people are writing down. They're saying 'we have to produce this fantastic CV. We have to play the game so well' . . .

Rebecca (UK): I didn't say it was fantastic, but it's your CV and that's not a game. That's the difference it's not a game.

Kate (Australia): No, it's your representation of how well you have played the game.

Rebecca (UK): No it's not; it's what work you have done (Symposium)

Again, what plays out in this lively dialogue are different and competing constructions of the university and university imperatives informing the nature and tenor of advice being offered to ECAs. Sarah and Rebecca, both professors in governance positions in their respective universities, aligned themselves more closely with the university, defended recruitment processes as transparent and equitable, and explicitly rejected the 'playing the game' metaphor. Kate, meanwhile, aligned herself more closely with the ECAs, and defended their usage of 'the game' metaphor.

Constructions of PESP

While there was ambivalence and discord regarding various constructions of the university, the professors spoke about the PESP field with much more warmth, enthusiasm, optimism and unity. The engagement of over 30 ECAs in 'The Letters Project' was used to highlight the strength of the field:

I am truly impressed by the fact that the letters are an outcome of submissions from over 30 ECAs in PESP. When I completed my PhD in the mid-1980s, there were far fewer of us with research training in our field. While we may not yet match other sport-related subdisciplines for critical mass, we are growing . . . you are a member of a rapidly developing field of research and practice where your

active participation is required to question taken-for-granted and traditional assumptions about academic work and to create conditions that will foster and facilitate our continuing growth. (Matthew, UK, Letter)

This perceived 'growth' of the PESP ECA 'community' was a significant source of optimism.

A second source of optimism for the professoriate was the 'passion', 'energy' and 'commitment' that ECAs bring to their research, teaching and service, which was variously identified as 'the most important thing in the letters' (Diana, Australia, Letter), and as something that is vital for ECAs to follow and nurture (Alison, USA, Letter). For Sinéad, 'the energy and commitment to the profession' communicated through the ECA letters suggested 'our discipline is in good hands in the years ahead' (Ireland, Letter).

A third cause for celebration was the diversity of academics that populate PESP. Historically, a field like PESP evolves by encompassing an increasing range of diverse and valued social activities and purposes, and the increasing diversity of research interests, accepted publication genres and the like was highlighted as a strength of the field going forward. There was also a sense of hopefulness around the ability of scholars in our field to produce at the level of scholars in other fields:

And if excellence in scholarship is something only a few can achieve, then frankly there is little hope for our field to improve its status within the academy. If other fields like chemistry and physics and biology (to name a few) can produce thousands of well-published academics, why can't we? (Matthew, UK, Letter)

In summary, therefore, the professoriate perceived that the increasing numbers of ECAs in the field, their passion, energy and commitment to doing good work, and the diversity of work that is being published were all very powerful and positive powerbases that will enhance the capacity of PESP to impose its specific logic, in interaction with other fields, over time (Bourdieu, 1992). Notably absent from the data, considering ongoing discussions in the PESP literature (Fernandez-Balboa, 1995; Macdonald, Kirk, & Braiuka, 1999), was any sense that the field might be increasingly struggling for institutional status.

Constructions of self

All of the professors responded in some way to questions about how ECAs should construct and position themselves along their academic ‘journeys’, and to the affective costs and compromises associated with pursuing a career in the academy. Again, although they engaged with similar issues (passion, balance, ambition, isolation, markers on the journey and so on), the advice was multiple and contradictory.

Firstly, many were at pains to highlight that neither struggle, nor compromise, nor perceptions of inadequacy were the sole preserves of the neophyte academic:

Academics at all levels, including myself and probably many of the other Professors responding, can relate all too well to the tensions you have drawn attention to—between desires to pursue issues you are personally passionate about, make the difference you want in the field... maintain quality and credibility in your scholarship—and the parallel institutional and systemic pressures to do particular sorts of research, pursue agendas and questions that have the potential to generate funding \$... and amidst this also deliver on quality teaching expectations and build a profile of service... Acknowledging that the issues exist across the spectrum of academic levels and across institutions internationally arguably strengthens the case for more openly addressing the issues in collegial conversations, and for talking seriously about some of the strategies and approaches that it may be useful for ECAs to consider... (Diana, Australia, Letter)

I can let you in on a secret. Many of us further up the career ladder (at least myself and many colleagues I know) feel the same way. I often feel insufficient and hope that I will not be ‘found out’, revealed to be inadequate and not good enough. I wonder, why do we feel the need to apologise for not being perfect in all areas of life? (Lars, Sweden, Letter)

There was disagreement, however, about whether and how much compromise was necessary, and where and when ECAs needed to focus their energies.

Passion

Pursuing a focused line of inquiry around the research questions one is passionate about versus falling in line with university research priorities, colleagues' agendas, and so on, was one tension the professoriate explicitly addressed. Some argued that when it came to the research questions ECAs should pursue, compromise might be necessary. Again, this advice was most frequently given by those professors in governance positions:

However, each should consider if the research questions you would like to address are robust and relevant to the aspirations of their university and the community, which it serves. It may be that as an ECA you might need to reshape your interests to align more closely with your institutional colleagues (Sarah, Australia, Letter)

Make sure your research area is of interest to others beyond yourself and your immediate colleagues or collaborators. This might sound a little harsh, but it is not meant that way. It is important to remember, however, that most of us are not self-employed and that we have a duty to address questions that matter to society. If we can't persuade anyone else that our preferred questions matter, then we may need to rethink and to compromise a little in order to get started. (Rebecca, UK, Letter)

Others, however, unequivocally called for ECAs to pursue the questions they were passionate about, and were less concerned about if and how these questions aligned with institutional priorities or other's agendas.

First, collaborate with people who help you advance what you collectively hope to do rather than get too caught up in helping others advance what THEY want to do at the expense of YOUR interests and passion . . . Do YOUR work Molly, that is the only way you will make a difference—follow your passion and trust your intuition. (Alison, USA, Letter)

My final advice in this letter is doing good work is about passion. With this I mean that good, interesting and rewarding work, whether it is research or teaching, becomes best when guided by passion; passion for the questions, for the answers, for the process, for the people, for the data, for the writing, for the

collaborations, for the impact (and not for the impact factor, Molly, or for the number of publications, Jason), for making a difference and for the joy of seeing other people grow. (Lars, Sweden, Letter)

Significantly, however, this advice tended to come from the younger or more recently appointed professors. Both Lars and Alison, for example, were relatively recently appointed full professors at the time these data were constructed.

Balance and ambition

Work–life balance was a second theme and tension that was explicitly addressed by the professoriate. Rather than advocating that ECAs work to strengthen the separation between work and home life, the majority of the professors advised acceptance of their often ‘messy’, ‘blurred’ and ‘seamless’ boundaries, and better time management:

Emily and Jason, you alluded to ‘work/life balance’. My sense is that in academia, life-work are seamless and therefore it’s important that early in your careers you learn how to manage your time in such a way that you can maintain the energy for a career marathon rather than a sprint as well as nurturing your well-being. (Sarah, Australia, Letter)

One discernable work–life balance discourse underpinning the advice focused on choice and ECAs’ ‘personal responsibility to get the balance right and control their time better’ (Lewis, Gambles, & Rapoport, 2007, p. 365), supporting the notion that survival in the neoliberal university is an individual responsibility (Ball, 2012). For some, balance was not even a very helpful notion, as it was deemed neither possible nor desirable:

Finally, ‘balance’ is something implicit and explicit in your letters as an issue to be addressed. People who know me would say I am not the person to ask about how to achieve ‘balance’. I don’t contest those views or reactions. Amidst what we are trying to achieve—with the passion you all share, I’m actually not sure it is too helpful a notion. Balance infers that it is possible and desirable to draw some fairly neat boundaries between various aspects of our life. The passion is personal—not just professional (Diana, Australia, Letter)

On a more pessimistic note, and as well as problematising the work–life balance binary, Mark asks ECAs to take a good hard look at what they are getting into:

It is worth saying in regard to work/life balance that for some academics this is not a binary issue. For some, their research is their life. However, the tales of the greatest scientists, artists and writers is a litany of broken relationships, ignored children and other issues that might be the wake of an obsession on one thing. Maybe it's worth considering the total life narrative of the academics you admire when you decide on whether or not you want to be like them. (Mark, Australia, Letter)

This cautionary reminder that ECAs needed to be mindful of not only 'What you want' but also 'How badly do you want it' (Charlie, Canada, Letter), was shared by a number of the professors, who were at pains to remind ECAs of the inevitable costs involved in pursuing any passion or ambition single-mindedly. There were also a few caveats for the more ambitious ECAs, who were, for example, reminded to 'pay their dues':

The whole point of scholarly work is that it is shared and debated and critiqued and revised. We learn from others' writing, we are stimulated by them, and we come up with new ways of thinking by dint of their previous efforts. Always remember this, particularly those of you who are particularly ambitious to advance your careers. As our North American colleagues would put it, always pay your dues (Matthew, UK, Letter)

Isolation

There was some consistency in the advice from the professoriate around the need for ECAs to recognise and recruit the network of social relations they have access to. The professors were particularly effusive about the value of collegial networks, advocating, for example, that ECAs 'find soul mates among [their] peers' (Sinéad, Ireland, Letter), prioritise 'the development of a network of fellow scholars in PESP and other sport-related fields' (Matthew, UK, Letter), and recognise the 'significance of collaborative endeavours to all and any of us being able to manage, balance, cope and succeed as academics' (Diana, Australia, Letter). This advice was often given in response to, and in

the context of, the isolation that many of ECAs had articulated. Moreover, there was a sense that given technological advances, it is much easier than it was in the past to reach out and develop collaborative relationships with peers and mentors in other institutions around the world:

Initially we used the Postal Service, telephone, and hung out at meetings. Now, Skype and FaceTime along with Google Drive, Dropbox, and track changes offer many other avenues for working together and supporting each other. (Andrew, USA, Letter)

Developing and extending peer and professional networks using digital technology was one of the few strategies of resistance explicitly articulated by the professors.

Markers on the journey

If there was disagreement about the appropriateness of recruiting the language of the game and the construction of a CV, there was a degree of accord about what counts as valuable, effective and satisfactory performance, and what measures or indicators of worth are valid and necessary markers at different points in the academic ‘journey’:

... without high quality research outputs in the form of papers, books and chapters you will eventually reach a ceiling on where your career can go ... Peer-reviewed publication is the very stuff of academic culture and you have to be good at doing both the research and writing it up. It’s a non-negotiable, essential, core competence for an academic. (Matthew, UK, Letter)

How you become known as an academic is (as distinct from a teacher) is largely by the permanent products you leave in journals, books and conference proceedings ... Grants may be important for career advancement, but perhaps ironically, your success in obtaining grants is not likely to be what you become known for as an academic. Your reputation will (hopefully) be formed by your scholarly publications. (Mark, Australia, Letter)

While peer-reviewed publications, then, were seen to be the ‘very stuff of academic culture’, and important from the outset of any academic career, there was an appreciation that grant success might require a little more patience and the development of a track record:

Most importantly is to recognize that unless large grants target ECAs (and check out any grants that do this) then you are not going to be able to do this alone—you are unlikely to have the track record nor the experience in managing grants that the large competitive grants usually require. (Kate, Australia, Letter)

The need to be patient when it came to realising one's ambitions, and to see one's career as a 'journey', aimed at 'doing good work' was a theme common across a number of the letters and contributions at the symposium:

For me this entails seeing academic life as a journey where you educate and cultivate yourself. Today in academia many people write but too few people read ... I think that well educated academics will be hard currency in the future, academics that not only write and read current research and uses of for example Bernstein, Vygotsky, Dewey, Piaget, Bourdieu or Foucault, but who also have read the original texts ... (Lars, Sweden, Letter)

Although patience was advocated when it came to pursuing grant success and enhancing the quality of one's scholarship, haste and timeliness characterised much of the professorial advice and insight around institutional 'fit' and mobility.

Take important career decisions—now—while there is still time. If you are keen to be a researcher and to make a real difference through your research, then you will be better supported in an institution that also places a high value on research. (Rebecca, UK, Letter)

While it was a great place to learn to be an assistant professor, I knew if I wanted to progress my research career I needed to be at a more research-intensive university ... I suspect if I had left it too long before I moved, I would have closed that door. (Sinéad, Ireland, Letter)

Again, much of these data could be interpreted as tailored toward the recognition and development of self-governing, neoliberal subjects with the capacity and resources to 'take control' (Rebecca, UK, Letter), and make these, sometimes risky, life decisions at specific points in time.

Conclusion

At different points in the analysis we were reminded that the contributions from the professoriate were reflective of the people who wrote or spoke them in very specific ways. Some of the participating professors held powerful positions not only in the PESP field, but also in their own faculties, departments and universities. A very obvious reminder of this occurred in the symposium, when one of the professors (Sinéad, Ireland) was highlighting how impressed she was that the ECAs had shared a passion for teaching in their narratives. She was interrupted by another professor who good-humouredly suggested that she had ‘spoken like a Dean’ (Andrew, USA). Now, there are a host of very good reasons why the professors might wish to remind us that, for example, teaching really does matter, that we should respect and acknowledge the work of those who have paved the scholarly way, and that we should align our research with institutional priorities. They are leaders in their field and in their universities, who have accumulated symbolic capital because they are sophisticated, in Bourdieun terms, at reading and playing the game. They know what is valued.

However, following Bourdieu (1988), one potential reading of the data, is that these professors are also invested in shoring up their capital in the various fields in which they function. Bourdieu would argue, however, that this interpretation does not imply cynical calculation on their part, as the strategies and practices employed by agents in any field to maximise their symbolic or social profits often reflect unconscious rather than conscious decision-making (Bourdieu, 1988). Moreover, it would be remiss of us not to acknowledge the pressures those ‘higher up the academic ladder’ face to construct themselves (whether consciously or not) in particular ways. For example, professors in governance positions in universities are required in many cases to become the voice of the university. They are evaluated not only on their individual performance, but also on their ability to lead others to perform in line with the university knowledge performance indicators of the day. Given this broader context, and the fact that these professors were asked directly by ECAs about how they might succeed in a neoliberal regime, it is unsurprising that much of their advice might be interpreted as aimed at helping the ECAs to become ‘more accomplished neoliberal subjects’ (Devos, 2007, p. 227). It should also be noted, however, that many of the ECAs explicitly asked for strategies to make their lives easier, not more complex or messy. Helping ECAs to comply with and succeed in the

neoliberal university might be the path of least resistance, and so again, it is quite easy to understand why much of the advice was focused on bringing ECAs in line with institutional priorities.

While the relative absence of strategies of resistance was an ‘inhabited silence’ (Mazzei, 2007) in the data, there was some evidence of a more radical, collegial mentoring through the kind of advice that foregrounded modest but meaningful strategies of resistance (Mountz et al., 2015). ECAs were urged to utilise digital technology to extend and build networks beyond their own institutions, to turn to each other for support, and also to recognise that ECAs and more established academics had a lot in common. Collaborative, collective and networked mentorship and progression was, therefore, a supported strategy of resistance. This kind of strategy calls for the replacement of the neoliberal ideal of the independent, individual, self-reliant citizen with the ideal of solidarity and mutuality amongst ECAs and between ECAs and all other agents in the field, and between networks of agents. Some professors also advocated a privileging of research questions and lines of inquiry that ECAs are passionate about and engaging in intellectual pursuits of intrinsic interest and value, rather than forcing alignment with strategic institutional priorities or pursuing research that satisfies senior colleague’s research interests and trajectories. Again, however, this advice did tend to come from those professors who did not hold significant governance positions in their university or who had not been professors for very long. We should be clear that while our data allows us to reflect on the position of the professors within university hierarchies and the potential relationship between these positions and the kinds of advice offered, it does not allow us to reflect in any substantive way on the habitus of the individual professors. We do acknowledge, however, that particular embodied commitments and dispositions might also explain why individual professors guided ECAs in one way or another.

The data generated by the professoriate was, therefore, ‘complex’, ‘contradictory’ and ‘incoherent’, adjectives that might, ironically, also be used to describe the sets of practices supported by neoliberal regimes in many different fields (Ball, 2012). The advice was also consistent with the professors’ various constructions of the university. Fields, especially those as sizable as the university field, are not homogenous entities. The analysis, however, suggests that at this point in time the distinctive structures and dynamics, and the forms of capital that are most valued within universities

across the world are more similar than different. Moreover, while we were, in part, searching for a degree of specificity associated with socialisation into PESP and insight into the specific forms of cultural capital valued in the field, what we found was that, contrary to Bourdieu's (1988) analysis, the forms of capital that are valued within PESP are also more similar than different to what is valued in other fields. It was also difficult to identify data that suggested a PESP specific academic habitus or 'feel for the game' that was extraordinarily different than what would be required in other fields. This finding is symptomatic, perhaps, of the pervasive neoliberal performance and accountability regime.

The professors' constructions of yesteryear reminded us, however, that fields are not fixed. While there may be an element of nostalgia in the professors' reflections about how things used to be, there was certainly a sense that the adoption by universities of a commercial ethos and performative sensibilities has meant that 'one sort of romance about being an academic is no longer speakable, thinkable, do-able in universities' (McWilliams & Hatcher, 1999, p. 69). There is also, potentially, a consolation of sorts for ECAs in the idea that, as a number of professors explicitly stated, it is more difficult to be an academic in the contemporary university, functioning as we do in 'regimes of performativity' (Ball, 2012). Unlike the constructions of the university, constructions of the PESP field of inquiry and its future were all positive. Again, however, context is everything. It would have been quite difficult for the professors to say otherwise, because they 'are possessed by the ends' (Bourdieu, 1988) of the PESP field, and because they were writing and speaking to individuals who in their words 'are the future of the field'.

However, their enthusiastic initial response to this project, and the generosity of spirit demonstrated through the time they took to think about, and write their letters were, arguably, practices born of passionate commitment to, and belief, in the PESP field and its future. Moreover, the nature of the advice the professors offered in relation to some of the more emotive issues and questions raised by the ECAs, and especially the contexts some of them offered for this advice provided evidence of both care and courage from a group of academics who have gained from, but have also evidently lost much to, the field and the university. The willingness of some to be honest and open about the costs they have incurred on their professional journeys was not wasted on the

ECAs, nor was their insight on how difficult, if not impossible, it is to achieve balance in all areas of your life.

It is not easy to tie this paper up neatly and tell a simple story of the data generated by the professors, tied as they were to individual professor's context, positions and habitus. Contained within this paper, therefore, are our very modest efforts to share what we have learned from the professors' constructions of the university and PESP, and the implications of these constructions for how ECAs are advised and mentored. We hope that this paper and the others generated by 'The Letters Project' represent a meaningful contribution to ongoing intergenerational dialogue about 'being and becoming' an academic in the PESP field of inquiry.

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