**Transition to Research: Experiencing new paradigms**

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**ABSTRACT:** The transition from undergraduate study to postgraduate research is a difficult one for students to negotiate. Similarly, the transition from disciplinary researcher to pedagogic researcher is a difficult transition for staff to undertake. There are similarities between the processes; transition from certainty to uncertainty, negotiation of a new paradigm, and both an epistemological and ontological shift. As such, the processes should result in a transformative learning experience (Mezirow, 1990, 1991). However, there are hurdles to overcome (Cousin, 2010; Meyer & Land, 2005) before the transition to researcher is complete. Transitions to Research in both contexts are being considered at Edinburgh Napier University, and are supported in a number of ways, via writing groups, a researcher development programme, our PGCTLHE, the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Resource Bank, and the peer reviewed journal, JPAAP. We will look at the similarities between the challenges postgraduate students and novice pedagogic researchers have to face, and take lessons from successful strategies.

**Introduction**

Transitions, by their nature, are difficult for those negotiating them. Within higher education, and specifically in Scotland, a great deal of effort has been placed on understanding and supporting transitions to university with the QAA Enhancement Themes The First Year Experience (Mayes, 2009), and transitions into the world of work with Employability (Bottomley & Williams, 2006) and Graduates for the 21st Century (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2011). In expanding the theme of Transitions, the transition to researcher emerges. The focus of this paper is to compare two transitions to research; that from undergraduate study to postgraduate research, the second being the transition from disciplinary researcher or practitioner to pedagogic researcher. Both of these transitions require transformations, ontological and epistemological. Postgraduate research students and novice pedagogic researchers may find themselves in a liminal state – in transition between two states of being, and may have to negotiate a series of thresholds on their journey. These thresholds may be understood as a “portal, opening up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something” that “represents a transformed way of understanding, or interpreting, or viewing something without which the learner cannot progress” (Meyer & Land, 2003, p. 1). Postgraduate students, for example, may feel uncertain moving towards the unknown in their research projects. Similarly, discipline or practice based academics engaging in pedagogical research may find themselves feeling like “informed amateurs in another discipline.” (Cousin, 2010, p. 6).

**Transformations towards a new identity**

“Transformational learning is defined as the process by which we transform problematic frames of reference (mindsets, habits of mind, meaning perspectives) – sets of assumptions and expectation – to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective and emotionally able to change.” (Mezirow, 2009, p. 92)

Transformations may be “epochal” or may be “cumulative”. At the heart of transformational learning is the notion that transformations are accompanied by critical reflection (Mezirow, 1990). This critical reflection can be extended to include prior learning experiences, and the assessment of how they best fit current situations. For both postgraduate researchers and novice pedagogical researchers, there may be, for example, a sociolinguistic perspective of transformation; for postgraduates, learning to think like a researcher rather than a student, and for novice pedagogical researchers, learning to negotiate an unfamiliar paradigm, with its own discourse and practices which are outside the researcher’s disciplinary expertise. Kegan (2009) adds to this the need to acknowledge learners’ history of prior transformational experiences and the importance of acknowledging learners’ current position in relation to where they should be in the future. Therefore we have to acknowledge that postgraduate researchers may have subject knowledge but may lack practical experience, while novice pedagogical researchers, whilst having a wealth of disciplinary knowledge and expertise, may have little pedagogical knowledge or experience to fall back on.

Keefer (2015) has identified areas of liminality in doctoral candidates. Isolation and loneliness, lack of confidence, research misalignment between candidate and supervisor were all identified as areas worthy of attention for new postgraduate researchers. The process of transformational learning can leave students feeling 'stuck' within the liminal state, unable to crossover a threshold of understanding (Kiley, 2009). Kiley suggests institutional support, tailored supervisory interventions and an inclusive research culture as strategies to support learners in the liminal state.

In terms of transformative opportunities for pedagogical researchers, Trigwell, Martin, Benjamin and Prosser (2000) argue that there are four dimensions of scholarship, each consisting of a number of stages which practitioners pass through. The *Informed* dimension, referring to engagement with pedagogical literature and the *Communication* dimension, referring to making work public and subject to external scrutiny have the potential to facilitate epistemological transformations. The *Reflection* dimension, referring to the ability of the individual to reflect on and in their practice, and the *Conception* dimension, referring to the individual’s conception of learning have the potential to foster ontological transformations. It is therefore necessary to support the development of pedagogical researchers in all four dimensions of scholarship.

Transition to pedagogical researcher may take place at more than one defined point in an academic career. For new academics, they may be introduced to pedagogical research as part of their Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education (PGCert), which forms part of the probationary requirements for many universities. However, many academics confront the transition to pedagogical research later in their careers, when they have already developed a wealth of expertise in their chosen discipline. This expertise may, in some cases, be a hindrance to academics wishing to transition to pedagogical research, as they rely on their disciplinary know-how to operate in a new field. While probationary academics are supported through the PGCert process, it may be assumed, perhaps incorrectly, that the transition to research in another field does not require equal support for those already established within their discipline. However, the transition to pedagogical research for mid-career academics may require careful formal support (Hubball, Clarke, & Poole, 2010), and take up to ten years for practitioners to be habituated (Kelly, Nesbit, & Oliver, 2012).

While there is a substantial academic literature on developing a doctoral identity there is less work considering the adoption of a secondary academic identity as a pedagogical researcher. Drawing on the themes emerging in doctoral identity we believe many of the findings are common to the emerging pedagogical researcher identity, therefore transitions of identity apply to both groups. Engaging in academic work (Paré, McAlpine, & Starke-Meyerring, 2006), integration into an academic community (McAlpine, Jazvac-Martek, & Gonsalves, 2008), and thinking and performing in the new identity (Tonso, 2006), are necessary steps to facilitate the transition to the new identity.

With this in mind, it is vital to offer a range of support for both postgraduate researchers, and novice pedagogical researchers in order to facilitate their possible transitions.

**Supporting the emerging researcher identity**

Currently, at Edinburgh Napier University, there is a range of support on offer which seeks to address these issues, for both postgraduate researchers and novice pedagogic researchers, summarised in Table 1.

Induction features for both groups. For postgraduate researchers, induction consists of events delivered at School level complemented by a University level one-day induction event that brings together research students to consider the PhD process, working with supervisors and the research culture at Edinburgh Napier. For *new* academic staff, academic induction takes place in two ways; the two day “Starter for 10” induction offered by Academic & Professional Development and ASPEN (Academic Strategy & Practice at Edinburgh Napier) staff, and by the induction workshop on offer to new academic staff taking the Postgraduate Certificate in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (PGCTLHE). The “Starter for 10” days are positioned six to nine months apart, the intention being that staff need the intervening time to gain some experience in learning and teaching in order to be able to engage fully with the activities on the second day. The second part of academic induction is the workshop at the start of the PGCTLHE, which introduces staff to the course content, which includes an independent pedagogic study which is carried out by participants over two trimesters.

Some support for transitions to research is available to our undergraduate student population. Undergraduate summer internships offer development opportunities to senior undergraduate students wishing to gain experience of carrying out research. Internships are run over 4-8 weeks during which interns are introduced to aspects of research such as planning experiments, managing time, writing up results and with research ethics issues. While the focus of these internships is to allow interns to experience what it is like to work in a research environment, it can also be seen as support for our students considering transition to a research degree.

Continuing support for postgraduate researchers continues with the Researcher Development Programme which provides a comprehensive programme of events designed to help students develop as independent researchers as their studies progress. All events in the programme are mapped against Vitae's Researcher Development Framework (www.vitae.ac.uk/researchers-professional-development/about-the-vitae-researcher-development-framework) allowing students to identify areas for development. Topics include training in specific research methodologies, popular research software packages such as SPSS and NVivo, through to presenting research, using social media as a researcher, developing thesis structures and preparing for the *viva* examination, and planning careers in research.

Table 1 Range of support offered to Research Students and Novice Pedagogical Researchers

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **PhD Research** | **Pedagogic Research** |
| *Induction*  School level induction  University wide induction days | *Induction for new staff*  “Starter for 10”  PGCTLHE induction workshop |
| *Support in early stages*  Undergraduate summer internships  Researcher Development programme | *Early career transition to pedagogic research*  PGCTLHE  *Support for mid-career academics*  ARISE – range of support, activities, and  community of practice  Teaching Fellows Community |
| *Writing support*  “Shut Up and Write” groups | *Writing support*  Teaching Fellow writing retreats  Teaching Fellow Journal  JPAAP  Learning, Teaching & Assessment Resource  Bank |
| *Presentation opportunities*  Student conferences | *Presentation opportunities*  Teaching Fellows Conference  Staff Learning and Teaching Conference |
| *Financial support*  Researcher-led initiatives | *Financial support*  Teaching Fellows Fund  Research pump priming fund |
| *Supervisor support*  SEDA course | *Personal Development Tutor support*  UG PDTs  Redevelopment of PGCTLHE |

New academic staff are supported through their PGCTLHE, through a variety of face-to-face workshops, online discussion forums, and directed core reading. As previously mentioned, the course culminates with an Independent Study, which is a piece of work proposed by the participant, with a negotiated learning contract and outcome artefact. Independent Studies may often inform curriculum development, or act as pilot studies for pedagogic research projects, and participants are encouraged to submit their projects as case studies in the Edinburgh Napier Learning, Teaching and Assessment Resource Bank ([staff.napier.ac.uk/services/vice-principal-academic/academic/LTA/Pages/LTA.aspx](http://staff.napier.ac.uk/services/vice-principal-academic/academic/LTA/Pages/LTA.aspx)), or produced as journal articles for pedagogic journals such as the Journal of Perspectives in Applied Academic Practice, which offers “Direct support for authors who are seeking to publish their first paper” ([jpaap.napier.ac.uk/index.php/JPAAP](http://jpaap.napier.ac.uk/index.php/JPAAP)).

The transition to pedagogic research may occur later in an academic career. For mid-career academics, the Teaching Fellows Community ([staff.napier.ac.uk/services/vice-principal-academic/academic/TFscheme/Pages/welcome.aspx](http://staff.napier.ac.uk/services/vice-principal-academic/academic/TFscheme/Pages/welcome.aspx)) offers support for academic staff with an interest in pedagogic research, while ARISE (The Academy for Research, Innovation and Scholarship in Education) offers a range of support and activities such as lectures and workshops, pedagogic research projects and a community of practice.

There is a range of practical support on offer for both postgraduate researchers and pedagogic researchers, in the forms of writing, presentation and financial support. “Shut up and Write” events are offered on campus. The 'Shut up and write' is an informal drop in session open to anyone interested in research, allowing dedicated time to focus on academic writing in a social setting (Mewburn, Osborne, & Caldwell, 2014). Teaching Fellows residential writing retreats are held off-campus, where staff can focus on one particular aspect of academic writing over three days, immersing themselves in the process. Opportunities to make work public include the Teaching Fellows Journal, the online journal JPAAP, the Learning, Teaching and Assessment (LTA) Resource Bank or external academic journals.

Opportunities to present work are on offer for PhD candidates via student conferences which are organised in each faculty. Students are required to deliver either a poster or oral presentation depending on their year of study, and the audience for these conference includes research active staff and supervisors from across the University. These conferences often represent the first formal research presentation undertaken by doctoral students and can be seen as an important aspect of the transition to a 'researcher identity'. For staff interested in pedagogical research, Edinburgh Napier University hosts both the Teaching Fellows Conference and Staff Teaching and Learning Conference. These opportunities to present research allow researchers to present their ideas to colleagues, and may result in gaining enough confidence to submit an abstract of work to a national or international conference, or to develop an article for a peer reviewed journal.

Financial support is available through researcher-led initiatives funding, which was established to allow research students and staff to identify their own professional development needs, develop proposals that would support this, and to help support a vibrant research culture at the university. Staff can seek support for pedagogical research projects through the Teaching Fellows Fund and the Research Pump Priming Fund helps to support disciplinary research proposals.

Finally, support is available for PhD supervisors, through the work of the Research and Innovation Office which runs a number of development events for supervisors including an intensive 3-day course on research degree supervision accredited by SEDA (the Staff and Educational Development Association). Staff on the PGCTLHE have the support of a Personal Development Tutor, who is normally a member of the course teaching team.

**Discussion**

The support on offer at Edinburgh Napier University works well for transitions to PhD, and the PGCTLHE is a supportive environment with enculturation into a Teaching Fellows’ community of practice. In order to improve support further, our current redevelopment of the PGCTLHE aims to build on these strengths with the conscious decision to include research and scholarship as one of its three key themes.

The secondary shift to pedagogical researcher identity may be less well supported, with a gap in the area of supervision for mid-career academic, or for those whose origins are in professional practice or from other educational or research institutions, to successfully transition to pedagogic researcher.

Recognising that the transition to pedagogical researcher may occur at any career stage, but that any transition may lead to transformative learning and shifts in identity, we are considering further ways to support our academics during their liminal state. Accepting Barnacle and Mewburn's (2010) argument that stand-alone events or courses decontextualised from the research process itself are less successful to support transformative learning and shifts in identity than an approach that is situated within 'the doing' of research, we aim to take lessons from successful initiatives used with students and to apply them with our transitioning academics. The development of ARISE aims to create a community of practice of pedagogical researchers across the university which will allow any member of staff undergoing the transition to pedagogical researcher to feel supported.

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