

# Seeing and Sticking, Being and Becoming: The Kaleidoscopic Impact of a Creative Intervention.

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## Abstract

New academic staff in universities experience uncertainty, liminality and ontological disturbance as a result of shifting professional identities and attempting to inhabit a complex role within the supercomplex world of the University. The uncertainty and instability experienced by new academics can be read as a microcosmic manifestation of the uncertainty of the modern age, which presents within the HE curriculum as a wicked problem, demanding innovative pedagogic solutions that build resilience and creativity within learners. This case study describes the use of collage-work within a PGCert Learning and Teaching in HE, which aims to break down discourses of certainty for participant groups consisting of new academic staff, through a process of collaborative meaning-making centred on visual metaphor. In a reflexive turn, the case study incorporates the voice of one of these student-academics, who reflects not only on the impact of the collage activity for her sense of academic and professional identity, but also on the way in which she has repurposed and re-imagined the collage as a pedagogic tool within her own teaching. The multiple iterations of the collage work are therefore revealed to have a cascading impact across learner groups, building resilience to an unknowable future through creative work that is in itself fluid and unpredictable.

## Key Words

Creativity; Academic Development; Risk Management; Student Engagement

## Introduction: Purpose

In 2004, Ron Barnett observed that the language of the modern world encapsulated a world order “characterised by ontological dispositions”, in which the key identifiable features are ‘fluidity’, ‘liquid modernity’, ‘risk’, ‘chaos’, ‘complexity’ and ‘fragmentation’ (Barnett, 2004, p.248.) For Barnett, “the challenges that the world now brings are of a new kind. They are changes that bear in upon our sense of our own being” (2004, p.249). Drawing on the notion of supercomplexity (Barnett, 2000) as an ontological challenge to individual notions of being, Barnett identifies the role of the university in the modern age as being “the project of critical enlightenment... to add to the supercomplexity that is the contemporary world” (2004, p.250). Arising from, and contributing to, “the pedagogical challenges that arise from an age of supercomplexity” (ibid.), is

*“a more personal form of uncertainty, the uncertainty that arises out of a personal sense that we could never hope satisfactorily even to describe the world, let alone act with assuredness in it... a personal sense that we never can come into a stable relationship with the world” (ibid.)*

Barnett’s work positions the complex world of individual jobs roles, “an image of intertwined spaghetti strands such that their patterns are indeterminable” both within and paradoxically in opposition to the supercomplex world of the university, and in doing so proposes an ontological disturbance located in the fragmentation of personal identity. This fragmentation, fluidity and uncertainty is felt most keenly by newly appointed early career academics (ECA), who are often “struggling to find their feet in the liminal space defined here as the ‘betwixt and between’ state that comes with moving from one role to another” (Loads and Smart, 2017, p.134). Barnett argues for a pedagogy that embraces “the educational task of coming to a position where one can prosper in a situation of multiple interpretations” (2004, p.251); a pedagogy for uncertainty. But how is this to be achieved when the purveyors of this pedagogy are themselves caught within a state of ontological liminality?

This case study explores the impact of a creative intervention, namely collage making, for facilitating engagement and reflection amongst a group of learners who present the unique perspective of simultaneously being students as well as staff at the same institution. This exercise aims to invoke a sense of being-for-uncertainty within the participants that then equips them to foster this resilience within their own students, through similarly innovative pedagogies of uncertainty. The case study presents the dual voice of one staff-as-student participant, who demonstrates through critically reflexive narrative how the impact of this activity has cultivated her own sense of academic identity and in consequence provided a pedagogic tool through which her own students are free to explore risk, identity and uncertainty within a safe space.

The University at which the authors are based is a post-92 HEI with a large number of vocational programmes; new teaching staff therefore arrive with a highly diverse range of professional experience. Immersed in the complex role of a teacher in HE, with varying levels of support from within their own faculties, it is not uncommon to meet new staff who are unsure of their roles and lacking confidence in their identities as teachers. This is not exclusive to staff from non-academic backgrounds; it can also be the case that new academic staff who have transitioned into teaching from a more research-focussed role face similar uncertainties. The collage exercise is used within the first session of the University’s PGCert Learning and Teaching in Higher Education; a compulsory programme of learning for new staff who have less than three years’ teaching experience within HE. The exercise is designed to encourage the sharing of perceptions via the creation of visual metaphors around the themes of “What teaching means to me” or “what does academic identity look like”. The activity draws on the work of Daphne Loads (2010, 2016) who has made extensive use of collage-making as an educational development exercise to support teaching staff. Loads follows Barnett (2004) in emphasising the importance of “being-for-

uncertainty” within academic life, which is often submerged beneath “discourses of certainty” in daily functionality:

*“Among my colleagues, I see glimpses of this being-for-uncertainty in informal exchanges and in some teaching situations. However, during formal meetings and in the public documentation of teaching and learning, this quality is often submerged under discourses of certainty” (2010, p.409).*

New teachers can be inherently vulnerable to this discourse of certainty, believing that their colleagues are confident in their roles and that any uncertainty expressed publicly may be taken as a sign of “not being up to the job”. The collage activity seeks to create a safe space within which uncertainties can be revealed, once staff embark upon the process of identifying visual metaphors that represent their own feelings about teaching. Loads further identifies that

*“[I]n the literature on teacher education and development, teachers’ personal metaphors have been valued for their potential to give access to unconscious ideas, stimulate the making of connections, bring together a large range of diverse knowledge, gain a helpful distance from practice, draw out implicit understandings and provide a language for explaining what teachers do” (2010, p.412).*

With this in mind, the purpose of the collage activity is to engage learners with their own personal metaphors, in order that submerged or subdued narratives of uncertainty may be vocalised through the screen afforded by such metaphoric representations of the supercomplex.

## **Process**

In workshop sessions consisting of between 10 and 25 participants, learners are asked to work in small groups of between 3 and 5. Each group is presented with flipchart paper, glue, scissors and magazines. Each group is asked to produce a collage using images that they have chosen from the magazines. In early iterations of this activity collages were titled “What academic identity looks like”, which assumed that participants had some conscious notion of what academic identity might be; with hindsight it is not surprising that participants sometimes struggled even to connect with the concept of academic identity, therefore in later sessions the activity was updated to directly follow Loads’ methodology, adopting the collage title “What teaching means to me”. This title is significant because in itself it invites an uncertain response and reveals a dislocation between the individual nature of “me” and the collaborative collage making activity. Who is “me”, in the collage, and how does this person(a) define teaching? These questions underpin the collaborative process and speak to the supercomplexity of the collage, and of academic identity itself, echoing Barnett’s own observation that “what I am as a doctor, student or professor is itself unclear, contested, destabilised” (2004, p.252). The collages themselves are collaborative, supercomplex metaphors that conceal the identity of the individual contributor, reflecting and refracting the ontological uncertainty of academic identity. The nature of the collage is such that there is no one interpretation, and the exercise therefore leads participants towards an acceptance

of the possibility of multiple interpretations. Further, the use of visual metaphor with little or no linguistic signification to act as a key, means that to each person that views the collage, the images chosen (both individual and in combination) will reveal a different truth about the nature of teaching. Restricting the choice of publication from which participants are able to draw their images is a key component of the process; one of the benefits of using the same publication for all is that participants are forced to critically examine each image to determine what, if anything, it might represent to them and how it might reveal a hidden truth about their own relationships with the role of 'teacher'. Participants have reported that the process of selecting and comparing images to use in the collage creates a safe way for them to voice their feelings about teaching, as it is the images themselves that are under discussion, rather than individuals' emotions. It is therefore beneficial for colleagues from the same department to work together, as the generation of this safe space allows for the externalisation of previously unvoiced experiences, thus facilitating improved communication within teams and breaking through some of the discourses of certainty that can impede or overwhelm new teachers. In a later paper, Loads identifies that the physical act of cutting and sticking is particularly well suited for challenging hegemonies, such as those presented by the establishment or the dominant organisational culture within a faculty or departmental team:

*“Cutup and collage produces unexpected juxtapositions that can lead to insight, and that allow for subconscious thoughts to come through. They help the researcher to reflect on connections and questions in ways that draw on intuition and metaphor, unsettling the linearity of written records (Vaughan, 2005)... Most excitingly, they open up possibilities for challenging hegemony: the meanings they represent are provisional, multiple and situated” (Bager-Elsborg and Loads, 2016, p.78).*

Such meanings recall Barnett's assertion that a pedagogy for uncertainty “is to be understood not primarily through pedagogical strategies, but is much more to be caught through metaphorical descriptors” (2004, p.257). To capture such a pedagogy, a new language is required, one “for risk, uncertainty and transformation of human being itself” (2004, p 258); arguably therefore a language that replicates the “betwixt and between” liminal space of ECA academic identity, and one that can be heard filling the spaces revealed between the visual metaphors of the collages and the narrated identities brought to the workshops. Crucially, “a pedagogy for uncertainty requires relatively open relationships between teacher and taught” (ibid.), and this is what is revealed in the following interrogation of the product, as a former participant in the collage workshop reflects upon its impact on her own teaching practice and ultimately the experience of her own students.

## Product



**Figure 1:** Collage produced by Author 2, March 2016, entitled *What Academic Identity Looks Like*.

Picture this. 1987. A recently graduated enforcement officer walks confidently across pavements made crunchy by black grit that rains down, once again, from a troublesome coal-fired boiler. She knows the legal requirements. She knows the theory. She knows the technology. Such certainty carries her through the doors of the senior engineer's office. Fast forward eight months and the enforcement officer and the engineer peer hopefully at the fire bed of the boiler and wish that this time firing up will not, once again, shower the town in grit.

Three years ago, with a bricolage of knowledge, experience and practice serving as credentials for a professional, I joined the teaching staff in the School of Engineering at UCLan. I enrolled as expected, on the PGCert, and my first experience of collage making was in response to the challenge of exploring my academic identity. I still have my collage and looking back at it now I can see that I incorporated two aspects using images taken from the materials provided and a few carefully chosen words. The first theme was what I thought I was, this I call "my being an academic", with references to my subject specialities, and being a thought leader, an academic superhero. I can see now that I also included more about what I try to do as an academic, the creating a safe space for learning, a safe haven, somewhere to encourage speaking up. From a later collage, assembled during a group activity, and representing what we thought an academic was, I can see the duality of being and doing appearing again.

In contrast to being reasonably comfortable in my role as a teacher, I became unsettled as I developed my session materials and engaged deeply and critically with my speciality of risk management, becoming less confident about my subject matter and the literal hegemony of certainty that I was teaching. Relying on Vincente (1993) for “what engineers know and how they know it” and simply teaching requisite knowledge and skills could not prepare my students for practice in a landscape that now seemed to me to be populated with Grint’s (2010) wicked problems, unprecedented threats to system order, and the possibility of coming face to face with one of Taleb’s (2007) Black Swan events. Hollnagel (2008) effectively overturned my certainty that “risk+barriers=safety”. If I was uncertain about the problem I was going to struggle to be an effective teacher.

After enjoying collaging as a student, I found it had helped me to explore the liminal spaces and expectation gaps between who I was as an academic previously, and who I needed to be now I had returned from being a manager. Students going into professional practice will need someone to pass on the knowledge and say they require people who have actually done the job themselves. Collage showed me this was not going to be enough. Therefore, I decided to repurpose collage for my teaching as both a space for expression and a more creative way of exploring what I now realised was the problematic, slippery, uncertain and multifaceted global and societal risk landscape. Over an eighteen-month period and within several modules I constructed a series of flipped activities with collage as the centrepiece. I asked the fire engineering and risk management students to bring along a selection of newspapers but remained deliberately vague about what we would be doing. I now begin these sessions with an activity to explore their individual perceptions of hazards and then challenge groups to use images from their newspapers to explore and explain the nature of global and societal risk. I give the students some time to browse their way around the display of collages on the walls and ask them to dot vote on their top five risks. In a recent session with postgraduate students, I photographed their collages for projection onto the screen and invited them to host a short, recorded discussion on their productions. Simply by being in the room with them and sensing the intensity of their concentration was enough to know they were engaging deeply with the challenge. The next morning I arrived to find them already absorbed in viewing and analysing their group recordings downloaded on their smartphones and laptops from the video library server. To maintain the flow I ask them to categorise their risks and compare them with published risk reports, for example from the World Economic Forum. The flipped activity continues as they reconsider how they perceive these risks as they switch between their multiple identities enforcers, professionals, parents, students, managers and leaders and finally to share their findings with the other students in the Virtual Learning Environment.

I find that replaying the recordings, looking at the collages, reading their discussions again, provides us with a growing realisation that the world of risk is not fixed, not certain, and not easily quantifiable.

At this point I shall switch again from teacher to learner. I need to think back to when I was an undergraduate. I know I readily absorbed the knowledge, the theories, the

givens of my discipline, I attended classes, I wrote my assignments, I passed my exams, not that any of this really helped with the problem-solving required when confronting those grit showers from that boiler. As an academic teaching the next generations of enforcement officers I had previously imparted the same given knowledge, supported the hegemony, prepared my students for work in a reasonably certain world. Later as a manager and adviser I knew what was required. I did what they expected me to do. I did not challenge as the complexity multiplied. I was comfortable.

As I cycle between being a teacher and a student I see that collage has given me a way of exploring the uncertainty in identity and reality. I learn that supercomplexity is the reality, not the future, and my role as teacher is to find ways to facilitate resilience in my students. I can find echoes of Barnett's "Being-for-Uncertainty", with its attendant dispositions of "thoughtfulness ... criticality... receptiveness...resilience...courage" (2004, p.258) in Provan et al's (2017) assertion that contemporary safety professionals require much more than technical and domain knowledge. They need relational abilities: to challenge, use constructive enquiry, to speak up; to form alliances; to have authority; to be influencers and to critically examine their beliefs.

Participating in two collage activities as a student gave me the time to reconnect with a previous identity as an academic that I left behind during seven years working as a professional adviser and manager in the National Health Service. It allowed me the opportunity to reaffirm, refresh and remodel my identity as an academic. I have learned that whereas previously I was expected mainly to be a purveyor of specialised and specific knowledge and skills and I find it fascinating that collage allowed us to share similar ideas that we now need to be academic superheroes, the ones who confront stereotypes, the ones who challenge the elites. My visual metaphors are accepted as being solely mine and give me an alternative way to express myself as I recover from inhabiting a managerial place where voice has to be compliant and subdued.

As a teacher, I have learned collage creates a space for students to recognise and explore multiple perspectives. My role is to facilitate the development of resilience in students as they prepare to navigate the supercomplexity of a risk landscape, a landscape where "risk+barriers no longer equals safety" and where they are the ones, not me, who have to develop the clumsy solutions for the wicked problems.

## **Conclusion**

*"Under such conditions, one goes forward not because one has either knowledge or skills but because one has a self that is adequate to such an uncertain world" (Barnett, 2004, p.254)*

This case study has explored a creative intervention that is born out of fluidity and uncertainty, and aims to recapture and re-appropriate them both through active meaning-making and immersion in metaphor. For participants on the PGCert LTHE, the collage activity encourages the externalisation of hidden fears and the ontological (occasionally epistemological) doubt that accompanies the transition from



one professional identity to another; for the students taught by one such participant, collaging is a tool that disturbs the hegemonic discourse of scientific fact, knowledge and certainties that disguise the need for professional graduates who are equipped to navigate, problematise and conceptualise the wicked problems of risk and the unknowable future. Both academic and undergraduate participants alike are therefore learning, within the supercomplex realm of the collage, to build the ontological resilience of possible future selves.

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