

Practising in an evaluative culture: An autoethnographic study of pedagogical practice in higher education

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Abstract

The prevailing culture in UK higher education is one of evaluation and performativity (Ball 2012). This study uses an autoethnographic approach to explore how working in an evaluative culture influences the pedagogical practices of a teaching focused lecturer. Data was generated in the form of memory data, self-observation/reflections and professional conversations with three colleagues. Social practice theory is used as a theoretical and analytical framework. Findings suggest that overtime, my academic identity has become characterised by resistance, a desire to be creative and work with autonomy to counteract the evaluative culture of higher education. I suggest that academic identity is significant in understanding and shaping pedagogical practice in university settings.

Keywords: pedagogical practices, evaluative culture, autoethnography, performativity, teaching focused

Introduction

After 7 years of working within higher education in the UK, the all-encompassing experience (Brew 2010) of being a teaching focused lecturer had left me with little space to examine myself within it. Higher education is evaluative, that is our practices within it are continually shaped by the requirement for them to be visibly measurable, quantifiable and auditable (Ball 2012). As teaching is complex and situated (Jones 2011) I have long felt curious about how academics develop their pedagogical practices within this culture. The aim of this autoethnographical study is therefore to explore how working within an evaluative culture has shaped my practice. It will aim to answer the following research question:

How does working in an evaluative culture shape pedagogical practices of a teaching focused lecturer?

This study will therefore contribute to discussions about the development and shaping of teaching focused roles within the '*measured university*' (Peseta, Barrie, and McLean 2017 453). This is relatively unexplored in the context of research considering the impact of neoliberalism in higher education (Tight 2019).

Literature Review

Evaluative cultures in UK higher education

In the UK, higher education has undergone significant changes since the 1980s. This era saw the onset of the influence of political ideology, namely the neoliberal project into the sector (S. Jones 2022) resulting in the expectation that higher education, alongside other public services, should operate according to principles of marketization, competition, individual self-interest and government deregulation (Sutton 2017; Tight 2019). As the sector expanded, or ‘massified’, from 1998 fees were introduced to finance this growth thus higher education shifted from largely public to private funding (Wakeling and Jefferies 2013). This repositioned students as consumers despite some students finding this positioning problematic (Gupta, Brooks and Abrahams 2023), strengthened the conception of higher education as a market firmly aligned with neoliberal principles (Edwards 2022).

Neoliberalism imposes a requirement for the generation of data to ‘test’ for efficiency and performance (Mau, 2019) to demonstrate competitiveness within the market. Managerialism enables this within universities (Winter 2009), characterised by top-down approaches to decision making and organisational functions, a reduction in professional autonomy and a focus on monitoring and auditing work for compliance purposes. These are now common features of the higher education sector representing a shift from a time when academics and institutions enjoyed relative autonomy (Collins, Gover, and Myers 2022). As a result, a culture of performativity has become embedded within universities (Ball 2012). This performativity expects the higher education workforce to ensure that scholarly and pedagogical work is auditable, measurable and accountable to ‘*encapsulate or represent the worth, quality or value of an individual or organisation*’ (Ball 2003 216). Cultures of evaluation are now therefore

pervasive in higher education as performativity is both caused by this evaluative culture and is an essential element of it (Sutton 2017).

Activities must now be measured for monitoring and marketing purposes; the university is now 'measured' in ways we might never have expected (Peseta, Barrie and McLean 2017). For example, university and subject league tables are constructed using a range of metrics that are designed to 'measure' how successful universities are. Exercises such as the Teaching and Research Excellent Frameworks, processes designed to measure and rate 'excellence' are powerful despite known problems with the use of quantitative metrics to measure 'success' (Wilsdon et al. 2015). Academics, regardless of the focus of their role, are subject to ongoing evaluation. For example, amount of successful funding applications, 'quality' of teaching, number of published outputs and meeting of targets via appraisal and probation processes (Smith 2017). These practices have fed a culture of evaluation within UK universities and within the higher education sector globally.

Evaluative cultures and teaching focused academics

The rise in teaching focused roles within the sector is related to the 'unbundling' of traditional academic tasks of research, teaching and administration to enable specialisms to compete within the increasingly competitive higher education environment (Rogers and Swain 2022; Probert and Sachs 2015, Macfarlane 2011). All academics are subject to evaluation of their 'performance', but what follows are some examples of the nuanced ways these performative measures impact teaching focused academics. The desire to standardise teaching through mandatory qualifications for example, is an outcome of the managerial approach to education and risks creating narrow procedural teaching experiences for students (Hickey and Riddle 2022) whilst ensuring that intuitions can advertise themselves as well qualified to teach. There

is evidence that academics find development opportunities helpful in forming a positive teacher identity (van Lankveld et al. 2017; Clegg 2009). However, the evidence of the effectiveness of these programmes is unclear with fears that they are an apparatus of the evaluative culture of universities (Kushnir and Spowart 2021) with the potential to set benchmarks of 'quality' according to neoliberal values rather than enabling autonomous professional judgements about pedagogical practices (Irvine 2012).

Other examples of evaluation processes and practices which are particularly important for teaching focused roles include standardised course and module information documents, evaluation forms, reductionist use of learning outcomes, standardised marking and assessment processes, fixed timetabling, processes for tutoring, promotion criteria and expectations that academics gain appropriate status with professional bodies. These examples have been introduced with good intent to provide structure, guidance and expectations for all. However, when functioning in an evaluative culture they can become a form of performative management (Ball 2012).

As both Peseta, Barrie and McLean (2017) and Billot and King (2017) point out, measuring and monitoring can serve important purposes in university settings such as drawing attention to the aspects of academic life that align with values of equality and ethical ways of working. A nuanced consideration of the functioning of the evaluative culture highlights that perhaps it is not always the apparatus of the culture itself that is the problem, more how the associated practices are enacted. The slavish use of learning outcomes is an excellent example of a pedagogical practice that can be interpreted as an outcome focused managerial measurement tool (Hadjianastasis 2017; Morley, Macfarlane, and Ablett 2017). However, if used creatively and flexibly can be used effectively to ensure transparency for students (Hussey and Smith 2008). Similarly, the use of student feedback could provide important insights if we remember that feelings of satisfaction are not a measurement of student learning (Pesta, Barrie and

McLean 2017). The requirements for measurement and quantification of pedagogical practices, regardless of their potential well-meaning intent, results in only that which can be quantifiable being measured (Biesta 2010). The more subjective and intangible aspects of students' experiences are impossible to accurately measure through metrics are therefore not surfaced or seen as important (Sutton 2017).

Some academics regardless of the focus of their role are thought to have complied with the evaluative culture as a method of avoiding negative career impacts (Clarke and Knight, 2015; Mula-Falcón, Caballero, and Segovia 2021) and some are thought to move strategically between compliance and resistance (Alvesson and Spicer 2017). Significantly, what has not received a great deal of research attention yet is what influences individual academics take these different positions (Tülübaş and Göktürk 2022). This study will contribute to understanding how a teaching focused academic navigates this landscape through an exploration of pedagogical practices using social practice theory as a theoretical framework.

Methodology

Theoretical framework

A desire to explore my pedagogical practices within this evaluative culture drew me to social practice theories. Practice theories developed from the work of Giddens (1984) and Bourdieu (1990). Giddens' (1984) structuration theory proposed that to understand social systems, we need to consider the interrelationship between structure and agency or the social and the individual. Neither exerts more of an influence over the other but instead our focus should be on the '*social practices ordered across space and time*' (Giddens 1984 2). Following the so called 'practice turn' (Schatzki, Knorr-Cetina, and von Savigny 2001), practice has become increasingly important in understanding the social world. Different practice theorists have different perspectives about how to conceptualise practice. But, all generally agree that

practices are '*embodied, materially mediated arrays of human activity centrally organised around shared practical understanding*' (Schatzki 2001 2, in Schatzki, Knorr-Cetina, and von Savigny 2001) and when investigating the social world, they should be the starting point of inquiry.

Shove, Pantzar, and Watson (2012) propose that social practices consist of three elements: materials, competences and meanings. That is, when analysing a practice, it can be broken down into these three components. They propose that *materials* are the physical 'things' of practices such as objects, infrastructure, technology and tangible items including the body, *competences* the skills, knowledge, understandings and techniques, and *meanings* are the symbolic meanings, significances, social implications and ideas of practices. They influence and shape each other but are not static. Over time, the elements can change independently of one another and exert a changed influence on the other elements and therefore the practice. I will use these three elements as a framework to analyse my pedagogical practices. Practice theory therefore enables me to foreground my pedagogical practices, these 'arrays of activity' as a focus of investigation to help me uncover why I practice pedagogically as I do and the influence of the evaluative culture of my work environment.

Research approach

This study uses autoethnography, a methodology in which the researcher uses their personal experience as data to explore and examine how cultural, social and contextual factors shape and influence experience and practices (Holman Jones, Adams, and Ellis 2013; Pulos 2021). Autoethnography has been used here for a specific reason: it allows a personal account or insider perspective to contribute to the understanding of how a university culture shapes pedagogical practices for those who are employed primarily to teach. This insider perspective

includes what I think, feel, perceive and see and the relationships with and between these elements of experience and the culture in which I work (Adams, Ellis and Holman Jones 2017). This aligns with social practice theory which proposes that practices result from the interrelationship between individuals and the social, or the 'auto' and 'ethno'. It will seek to reveal aspects of my pedagogical practices and their relationship with the culture in which I work which are currently unknown to me, that is, this study will be purposefully exposing (Humphreys 2005).

Whilst autoethnography has been used successfully to explore aspects of the academic world (for example Learmonth and Humphreys 2011), it is not without its challenges. Autoethnography's purposeful blurring of boundaries between the "observer and observed" (Anderson and Glass-Coffin 2013 58) must align with a researcher's ontological and epistemological position. It is a methodology that requires a deep commitment and belief in the value of subjectivity to generate knowledge. This can lead to suggestions of self-indulgence. Reflexivity is therefore essential to avoid simply telling a story but be interpreted to be useful for others. However, this process can be deeply personal and leave autoethnographers vulnerable (Winkler 2018). Despite the desire for complete openness and transparency, it should be acknowledged that autoethnographers may, even unconsciously, avoid exposing aspects of their experiences which may be troubling.

Positionality

Transparency about positionality is essential in autoethnography. I am a permanently employed lecturer giving me relative role security. I am employed on a 'teaching and scholarship' contract which, in my institution, denotes a teaching focused role. I teach undergraduates on a qualifying social work programme. I entered into this role having spent a substantial amount of time as a practising social worker. Practitioners moving from a professional setting onto

teaching focused roles in higher education is a feature in the development and expansion of teaching focused academic roles (Probert and Sachs 2015).

I believe that as a professional I should have autonomy to teach in ways that align with my values which include being responsive, creative, compassionate and relationship-based. These underpin constructivism as my pedagogical approach which aims to support learning experiences which are transformative, enabling students to actively create their own learning rather than receiving knowledge transactionally (Windschitl 2002). I am concerned that pedagogy based on these principles is becoming more difficult as practice becomes restricted by required performative measures. As I explore my pedagogical practices here, I aim not to provide a narrative that reflects all academic's experiences, more one that might provide resonance and usefulness for others with similar beliefs (Bochner and Ellis 2016) and for those who have a teaching focused role within higher education.

Data collection

Appropriate ethical approval was gained from [redacted for peer review] prior to data collection. Chang (2008 71-106) suggests using three different sources and related methods for creating autoethnographical data which I adopted in this study. Firstly, I constructed personal memory data with the aim of mapping my practices over my time in role. This was depicted on a timeline which started as a basic chronology. Several layers were added as I used journal writings, which I have kept for several years, to capture the thoughts and emotions of specific times and other external documents such as a promotion application, appraisal documentation and a range of teaching and module planning notes. Together, both the chronology and supplementary data provided a thick and temporal picture of my practices. There is a debate within the autoethnographic literature about whether it is necessary for memory data to exist in a physical, documented form or whether 'memory' itself is adequate and appropriate

(Winkler 2018). Given the acknowledged problems with memory (Giorgio 2013), here I used these documents to develop and deepen my timeline data by materialising it. Secondly, over a 4-week period I recorded in note form on the hour between 8am and 8pm for 20 working days self-observations and reflections of my work-related activities. This writing of 'field-notes' is core method in autoethnography and enables contemporary documentation of experience (Anderson and Glass-Coffin 2013). Thirdly, I held focused professional conversations with three colleagues which generated transcripts. The purpose of these conversations was to draw on external perspectives about our working context and their perceptions of me within it. One of the challenges of autoethnography is finding a balance between the 'auto' and the 'ethno' to understanding culture through experience. The invitation for colleagues to share their perspectives here was to ensure the 'auto' did not dominate at the expense of 'ethno' (Winkler 2018). I took all available steps to ensure that colleagues did not feel compelled to be involved given the potentially problematic nature of including work colleagues as participants.

Data analysis

I took a hybrid inductive/deductive approach (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006) to analysing and interpreting the timeline, self-observations/reflections and transcripts. I first inductively generated codes and then themes using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2022a). As Braun and Clarke (2021, 2022b) say, reflexive thematic analysis requires the subjectivity of the researcher conducting the analysis to be at least accepted if not celebrated as a positive resource in the interpretive process. Reflexivity is key here (Morriss 2024) to ensure 'methodological integrity' (Levitt et al 2017) with the deeply subjective autoethnographic data generation and the question this research is aiming to answer.

Braun and Clarke (2022a) outline a 6 phase approach to conducting reflexive thematic analysis. Phases 1 and 2 involve data familiarisation and initial code generation. These stages involved

reading and re-reading though all three data sources, noting aspects that seemed interesting or significant. These notes developed into initial codes which continued to change and develop with each re-consideration of the data. Reflexivity was key here as I held awareness of and harnessed my subjectiveness, particularly in relation to how my thoughts and feelings about working in what I believe is an evaluative culture influenced how I was ‘seeing’ the data. Phase 3 involved actively using my own insights to look for connections between the codes and experimenting with how combining codes could create initial themes, which were multi-dimensional and complex. Phase 4 involved reviewing these initial themes, a time consuming and demanding process of returning to the coded data to check for coherence which prompted further reconsideration and refinement of codes and themes. This generation of codes and then themes was recursive and non-linear moving between analysis and interpretation several times to construct meanings from the data as is usual in autoethnography (Chang 2008).

Phase 5 is the final refinement, definition and naming of the themes which should communicate the story of the data. Whilst themes themselves are often an ‘end-point’ for discussion in a thematic analysis, here the desire to use practice theory as an analytical framework meant that the construction of themes was not the final stage, but instead the analysis moved to the deductive approach to align themes with the already established categories from Shove, Pantzar, and Watson’s (2012) conception of the elements of social practices; materials, competence and meanings. This hybrid approach to data analysis enabled both the subjective construction of meaning generation from the data, and the pragmatic use of pre-determined theoretical categories of practice theory to promote rigorous use of this theory as an analytical tool (Proudfoot 2022).

Phase 6 of Braun and Clarke’s process is writing up which continues the analytic process. In this spirit, and to strengthening the integration of reflexive thematic analysis and social practice theory, I applied the idea of ‘blocks’ of practices, a concept used by practice theorists (Reckwitz

2002). A 'block' of practice is formed when specific elements are integrated. I developed four 'blocks' of pedagogical practice, administration, planning, facilitation and review which when combined I would describe as my overall pedagogical practice. I constructed these blocks of practices after I had developed my themes for two important and interrelated reasons. Firstly, as a method of organising the data to promote a deeper analysis than the overall category of pedagogical practice allows. Secondly, because as I began analysing the data, it became apparent that the relationship between the three elements of practice theory (materials, competence and meaning) integrate in different ways depending on exactly what aspect of pedagogical practice I am considering. Therefore, the use of these blocks enabled the ongoing analysis within the writing phase by supporting the exploration of themes as elements of practices associated to the specific activities related to my teaching role. I will discuss each of my four blocks individually below to support a rich analysis of my practices but in reality, there are overlaps between these four blocks.

Findings

The elements

The below table gives an overview of the alignment of my themes with the three elements of my pedagogical practices. I will explore my four blocks of pedagogical practices below to analyse the unique relationship between the three elements of practice within each.

[Table 1 here]

1. Teaching administration

Here I am referring to the institutional processes of arranging teaching. These include activities such as writing measurable learning outcomes, organising assessments, producing online learning spaces all whilst engaging with required institutional processes. *Material* elements of

my practice appear to have been fairly static overtime and include technology, stationery and furniture as physical objects to enable this work. *Competences* in the form of understanding systems and processes have developed through experience as supported by conversation data:

...one if the things is when you've been somewhere for a while, the processes and how things work, that first couple of years, it can dominate your learning....like the...now I'm quite enjoying.....kind of having being a bit more clear in how all the processes of running a module work.

Competencies in organisation have also integrated with the *material* routines and rhythms of these systems and process and where and when they feature in the academic year. My memory data suggests that administration initially had a *meaning* of power, responsibility and value which was invigorating, exciting and motivating. This grew from the sense of autonomy that I felt I had in terms of how I organised my teaching. I felt trusted and empowered to administer my teaching within the administrative structures which initially felt helpful in guiding what I should be doing. Notes on my timeline reflecting when I started my role say:

Status – own office – autonomy - trusted

Teaching administration has since emerged to feel restrictive as my *competence* has developed insight into *meanings* which have become one of compliance and performance with systems and structures. Self-observation/reflection data suggests that this has now become a menial practice:

a bit of space to consider changes to my two modules that have now been approved by faculty. Well actually what that means is mapping LOs...prime example of how instead of actually thinking about pedagogical practices I actually spend my time ticking boxes (almost literally)

The requirement to comply with processes is not new, rather my relationship with the associated structures has changed as I perceive them now largely as an aspect of the culture of evaluation within which I work. That is, these administrative processes, such as module information forms, feel to be mostly about ensuring that teaching is visibly measurable and quantifiable. My teaching administration practice has therefore changed as the elements of *competence* and *meaning* have changed. A comment in one of my conversations reveals I have recently been observed to be '*pushing at the edges*' of administration practices. I am now more likely to vocalise my concerns about administrative processes that I perceive to contribute to restrictive teaching. I can also see that I look for opportunities in my teaching administration to avoid the processes being limiting, for example by reducing the amount and specificity of learning outcomes for modules. As a colleague says in one conversation in relation to my practice:

I suppose the real question is the extent to which you can engage with them in a way that isn't or is minimally compromising

My practice in this area is now characterised by challenge and resistance rather than compliance as it was in the past.

2. Teaching planning

Teaching planning here refers to the practice of preparing specific teaching sessions within modules. My memory data signals that teaching planning has always been an enjoyable practice because the *meaning* of it is autonomy, worthiness and authenticity. My developing *competencies* in teaching design, student engagement, organisation and decision making combined with a changing emphasis on different *materials* in and of the physical spaces where this practice takes place has resulted in the experience becoming even more rewarding over time. My self-observation/reflection data is littered with comments such as how much I enjoy

the *materials* and space of my office for example: *'cup of tea, lovely warm office'* and comfortableness with the rhythms and routines of the academic year meaning I am able to be confident about being organised and ready to teach when I am required to: *'teaching prep all done, building on last year, feeling comfortable with it'*.

My warm, quiet and comfortable office is symbolic of a productive workspace which has *meanings* of value and worth. Whilst in this space, the use of *materials* has changed from a reliance on technology such as PowerPoint to provide a detailed map of the teaching I am planning to traditional stationery being far more central to my teaching preparation. This is because my practice in teaching facilitation has changed from a transmission to a more discursive approach which requires a less formulaic teaching session plan. Others, as noted in my conversation data, have observed this change in planning to be more imaginative in a practical applicable way: *'you are really good at creating stuff to make that happen in practice'*. In line with this, outdoor space has become as important as my office as a *material* location to develop *competencies* in teaching design because of the *meaning* I associate with the outdoors; a motivational space to think in a limitless way as captured in my self-observation/reflection data *'out for a run = space to think'*.

This 'freeing up' of my approach to teaching planning has been a developmental process in which increased confidence has played a significant role as my competences have developed. As I say in one of the conversations in response to a point made by a colleague about recognising that silence is sometimes important in letting students have time and space to think within the classroom:

Confidence and competence....I don't worry so much about that kind of.....I'm not afraid of awkwardness or feel that it's necessarily my responsibility maybe in a way that I used to.

Interestingly, engaging successfully in the promotions process and other developmental activities have increased my confidence. This is an example of how processes which I would categorise as aspects of a culture of evaluation in their creation of quantifiable and auditable aims have contributed positively to my teaching planning. I note that on my timeline I have made positive notes aligned with when I gained the status of senior fellow:

- *Safety*
- *Humility*
- *Ambition – influence*
- *Stating teaching philosophy*

3. Teaching facilitation

My teaching facilitation practice has also changed because the elements of *materials* and *competencies* have changed. *Materials* are prevalent in the data related to teaching facilitation, in particular the physical space and objects used in teaching for example furniture and technology. My memory data notes when I began to move furniture to create a space that suited different teaching designs as my *competency* and confidence grew. My self-observation/reflection data includes ways I now might try manipulate the teaching space and use myself within it:

‘in this session use of room/tables/floor/slides for movement in restricted space.....how I stand up and move and avoid too much talking’

This is related to my growing understanding of teaching approaches and therefore *competencies* in assessing and making decisions about effective methods to support learning. For example, my timeline tracks when I started experimenting with experiential methods within the classroom. Questioning what prompted this development reveals that the more experienced I become, the more space I have to think about effective teaching. This increased opportunity

to think and reflect is directly linked to my developing *competences* in the processes, or the evaluative structures that sit around teaching. I need to focus less on these procedural aspects and their requirements for conformity, compliance and visible measurement as I become embedded in them and consequently have more energy and time to think about my own teaching facilitation developmentally. My conversation data indicates how a growing sense of confidence in what I/we do is helpful:

We've got over the top about this kind of evaluation and so on. We should trust people to do a good job knowing that people want to do it, you know, produced good modules. They want to do good things. They want to be innovative. And this culture is kind of constraining it. And we've gone too far and I think what you are starting to see is....quality assurance can be highly effective when it's light touch

Interestingly here, data in the form of my promotion application, teaching qualification and application to become a senior fellow of AdvanceHE captures my developing confidence in facilitating teaching based on my teaching philosophy. This philosophy is that learning takes place in spaces where positive relationships exist and students are supported to be creative and construct their own learning. The positive impact of this approach was confirmed in *material* module evaluation forms. My self-observation/reflection data says:

'chatting to x about relationships in the classroom. That's what it is all about. I truly believe creating safe creative spaces is when learning takes place'

As a result, my teaching facilitation practice has shifted from a transmission style to one which is far more creative, responsive and flexible but less measurable. This has been supported by some of the evaluative processes such as module evaluations, promotion processes and my teaching qualification which I had increasingly perceived as solely performative.

4. Teaching reviewing

Teaching reviewing here refers to formal practices of reviewing teaching sessions for purposes of improvement. My memory data suggests the *materials* involved in these formal development processes and associated paperwork such as appraisal documents, module evaluations and annual reviews have remained unchanged over my time in post. However, the *meaning* of reviewing teaching has become increasingly performative rather than a genuine desire to engage with students about their experiences. My self-observation data captures my feelings at the prospect of reviewing teaching with my colleagues:

Team meeting. Feeling so resistant. I'm so disappointed at the lack of ambition and critical-ness. I am frustrated by the 'compliance' nature of it all....so limiting.

As my *competence* in teaching design has developed, I have felt increasingly frustrated with formal processes for reviewing teaching as they have a *meaning* of compliance with a focus on whether students are happy and whether we can measure that rather than if they have learnt anything. A comment from one conversation captures a sense that the *meaning* of reviewing teaching has become skewed:

No one really actually asks questions... I've asked about our teaching in this very very monitoring culture but ironically it's not about what we teach, it's whether students are happy'

My practices in relation to reviewing teaching have therefore changed overtime with my growing awareness of the institutional purposes of monitoring and measuring teaching. I am now less inclined to comply with these formal processes and much more likely to have discussions in the classroom with students about their lived experiences of my teaching facilitation, a practice which I believe is worthwhile but is not captured anywhere formally in a way that allows measured evaluation. This has been possible to some degree because of my

increased *competence* and associated confidence brought about by positive comments from students both formally and informally.

Summary of findings

Teaching administration and review practices have changed from relative compliance with the university's evaluative processes, to a practice which is at times resistant to institutional expectations. This has happened as my *competence* developed in terms of my critical awareness of the sector which also influenced the *meanings* of these practices. *Materials* have remained fairly static. Teaching planning and facilitation practices have changed in a different way, from practices of doing and preparing for transmission style teaching, which also felt compliant with tacit expectations about what teaching should look like. These changes were supported by some of the processes that I would categorise as aspects of the evaluative culture in which we work such as promotion and senior fellowship applications. As my *competency* in understanding effective teaching developed, I have changed the *materials* I use in teaching to move towards a more creative, responsive and flexible practice which influences both what I do within the classroom but also therefore how I plan. These findings indicate that a change in *competence* in particular has been significant in the changes to my pedagogical practices.

Discussion

This study uses social practice theory to centralise and analyse pedagogical practices within an evaluative culture within a UK university. What this reveals is the relevance of my academic identity in how I practice in my teaching focused role within the evaluative culture of my work setting. Academic identity here is conceptualised as the sense of self academics have, how we 'see' ourselves within academic settings. This identity is fluid and unfixed, is situation dependent and shaped by relationships, everyday practices and culture (Dickinson Fowler and Griffiths 2022; Henkel 2005; Jiménez 2024). The evaluative culture of higher education is

contributing to a “*precarious*” sense of identity for teaching focused academics (Jiménez 2024 757) because teaching focused roles are increasingly characterised by reducing autonomy and increasing instrumentalism. The below discussion draws on the findings of this study to explore the role of identity in the development of my resistance and confidence as ways of managing myself in this environment along with how my academic identity is constructed and re-constructed as a result.

Developing resistance

My practices of teaching administration and review have changed over the time that I have been in post. This changed practice is characterised by less compliance and more overt challenge and resistance to what I now perceive to be a bureaucratic and at times meaningless practice. The materials involved such as routines, infrastructures, physical objects and technology have remained fairly static in my timeframe but as my competency and critical awareness has developed, the meanings of these material structures have changed to be less about supporting students to one that feels motivated by creating auditable artefacts. I recognise the benefits of having transparent processes for students, but this does not feel to be the primary of these procedures. This shift towards performative bureaucracy (Hickey and Riddle 2023) is powerful and influenced by neoliberal values. With experience, I have developed awareness of how the resultant evaluative culture in UK higher education, characterised by the centring of processes for measurement, conformity and compliance infuse some aspects of pedagogical practices negatively. As Ball (2012) states, neoliberalism is so omnipresent that our ways of working can become steeped in it with it without us knowing. This explains why I initially saw no issues with the evaluative nature of teaching administration and review practices and in my compliance, I contributed to its existence. As I became more critically aware, my practices became characterised by resistance and challenge although not overt refusal. My academic identity shifted and reconstituted to absorb these characteristics over the time I have spent

within this context. I believe that higher education should be a place of personal growth and transformation (Ashwin 2020) rather than a product to be bought. This belief, an aspect of my academic identity, means that I began to struggle to comply with some pedagogical practices, for example, encouraging student completion of evaluations and writing module descriptors to appeal to future applicants because I found them to be restrictive, undermining (van Lankveld et al, 2017) and evaluative for the purposes of the consumerist agenda in higher education (Ball 2012),

This reflexive and critical awareness of my working context has influenced my academic identity (Brew 2010). However, it has only done so as I began to embody the associated performative practices. Practice theory recognises the importance of time and space. Overtime, persistent practices in a location contribute to the formation of institutions (Blue 2019) indicating the significance of practices in contributing to structures. The more academics quietly comply with the evaluative culture of our work context, the more these structures will become fixed, and the more institutionalised academics could become. That is not to say that all academics should resist all processes around teaching administration and review. Ultimately, we are employed members of staff with contractual responsibilities. But, critical awareness and willingness to challenge could result in less procedural and bureaucratic processes which prioritise creating conditions for learning rather than conditions for performativity.

Growing confidence

The influence of context on identity has a different relationship with my pedagogical practices of planning and facilitating teaching. In my experience, the positive meaning of these two blocks of pedagogical practices has persisted over time. Teaching has always been about growth and transformation for me, a belief I can attribute to my own experiences of being a

student and one which has always been an element of my identity as a teaching focused lecturer. Self-awareness supports our understanding of our teacher identity (Nevgi and Löffström 2015) and there is no question that these deep-rooted beliefs reflexively influence my own practices now (Fook 2016).

Overtime, my competencies in teaching have developed and as a result the material ways in which I plan and then literally teach. Here the evaluative contextual aspects of higher education which I, amongst others, experience as restrictive (Tillema and Kremer-Hayon 2005) seem to have less reach. As my competency has developed so has my confidence which has motivated me to pursue teaching practices that are aligned to my beliefs about teaching. I recognise that in the time I have been in post, my approach has changed from a transmission (Pratt 2002) style to a style which is much more flexible, creative and responsive. This has been supported and encouraged by positive student feedback provided via module evaluations and successful promotion and senior fellow applications, processes which are elements of evaluative cultures. They contributed to a growing confidence in my pedagogical approaches, sense of professional autonomy and associated academic identity. The changes to my practices have been supported by some of the very processes that I have criticised as being evaluative such as module evaluations and promotion applications. Acknowledging how I have complied with and then benefited from these processes is surprising but there is no doubt that they have played a role in developing my competence. These, along with the sense of appreciation I gained from module evaluations, are both aspects of positive teacher identity (van Lankveld et al, 2017) indicating how evaluative processes can have an encouraging relationship with practices and identity.

Academic identity construction and re-construction

Times of change and disruption within our working life prompt reflection and existential questions about who we are as we try to find our 'place' within the structures that boundary what we do (Ibarra and Barulescu 2010). A growing awareness of the evaluative nature of my workplace stimulated a desire for me to understand myself within it. As Ibarra and Barulescu (2010) explore, identity interacts with situational factors which further then influences the construction and re-construction of our identity. However, within this interaction, agency exists and plays a role. I now consciously look for gaps and spaces where I can hold onto the pedagogical practices that remain worthwhile and meaningful for me. This study has demonstrated that this does remain possible, sometimes by using some of the very evaluative processes I have previously criticised. The aspects of my role that remain fulfilling are the places where I can still work with authenticity, courage and autonomy to embody my reflexive beliefs about the purpose of education being a purposeful and transformational experience for those who engage in it. These beliefs reflect my values and underpin my academic identity and pedagogical practices. I have uncovered how my academic identity is influenced by critical awareness of the need to resist but also use some of the evaluative processes of higher education and how this resistance and awareness therefore become strategies for holding onto academic identity (Clarke and Knight 2015). This contributes to understanding the role of academic identity in why teaching focused academics position themselves as they do in response to the performative nature of higher education (Tülübaş and Göktürk 2022).

Despite feeling like I have some agency in some aspects of my pedagogical practices, this should not be taken as evidence that individuals can mitigate all restrictive structures in higher education settings created by managerialism. Structure remains powerful (Zhuang 2023) and care must be taken to avoid framing dilemmas in pedagogical practices as an individual problem to be personally overcome (Tillema and Kremer-Hayon 2005). What individual

lecturers and academics can do is commit to challenging and resisting neoliberal structures which dominate educational settings but also using them to our advantage when possible. Individual agency can be collectively used (D. Jones 2022) and contribute to critical awareness about the evaluative culture in which we work.

Conclusion

The autoethnographic nature of this research should be understood not as an attempt to discover generalisable findings, but to be a rich study of one person's experience of a teaching focused academic role. Its limitation is therefore in its individualism although it is hoped that others may find resonance in it and use as a prompt for critical reflection. A specific research question was posed at the start of this research: how does working in an evaluative culture shape pedagogical practices of a teaching focused lecturer? What emerges here is a complex and interrelated relationship between practice, culture and identity.

My academic identity has always included valuing professional autonomy, and this has been strengthened by my developing confidence, competence and awareness of the evaluative culture in which I practice. This has resulted in my practices being braver, more creative and responsive in the classroom and more resistant and challenging of processes that feel performative. This is motivated by a desire to avoid these processes undermining the pedagogical approaches which are aligned with my identity and that I believe are effective. Temporality appears important because overtime my awareness of the requirement for compliance related activity in the neoliberal university developed. Competence in my role appears to have developed in parallel with experience and these have enabled me to find ways to manage the impact of my working culture. This culture has therefore helped shape both my academic identity and how I want to practice, both of which then continue to influence how I perceive, understand and respond to working within an evaluative culture. This study suggests

that it is currently still possible for teaching focused lecturers to find ways to practice that align with our identity at least some of the time despite the acknowledged challenges of working in an evaluative culture.

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Table 1 – Themes aligned with the three different elements of my pedagogical practices

Materials	Competences	Meanings
Physical spaces	Organising	Compliance
Objects in physical spaces	Use of IT systems	Performance
Formal development paperwork	Knowledge of processes	Authenticity
Routines	Assessing	Value
Technology	Decision making	Autonomy
Evaluation forms	Engaging students	Motivation
Online systems	Teaching design	Worthy
Furniture		Power
Stationary		Responsibility

