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Snapshots

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SNAPSHOTS

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I was drawn to Doherty’s (2021) poem because I too made books as a child—folding sheets of paper into a book, sometimes just drawing pictures or adding squiggly lines of ‘text.’ Later, these developed into short stories I wrote about my friends, dolls, or cuddly toys. I have always loved reading and writing, but I never felt I was a good enough writer to pursue that as a career. At university, I took a creative writing class, and it was clear I didn’t have ‘it.’ But in my job as an academic and researcher, I now have opportunities to write.

Due to my recent work as Chair of the IOE Early Career Network (ECN), I have become increasingly interested in the pathways that lead us to academia—the journeys that academic staff take are always different, and as Doherty (2023) discusses in her creative piece, the journey is often challenging. Conducting research with and about early career (EC) staff has also invited me to reflect on my own journey through academia and all the experiences that shaped the person I am today. Some were amazing experiences, and others were very challenging at the time. Now, when I look back, the challenging moments were often the most formative experiences. These obstacles that we encounter can sometimes be warnings or guide us down a particular path that we are better suited for. Or they can be those ‘threshold concepts’ or moments (Cook-Sather, 2014) that make us see the world in a different way. Because I am stubborn, sometimes those challenging moments made me try even harder, waking me up from coasting along in a comfortable space.

While research on the working lives of academics is surprisingly sparse, some researchers, such as Austin (2002) have called for a clearer pathway from student to academic, arguing that in the current context, universities do not do enough to support doctoral students to become well-rounded academics, instead teaching and research opportunities are “structured more to serve institutional or faculty needs than to ensure a high quality learning experience for graduate students” (p. 95). Research on EC experiences has focused on a number of factors, from socialization and belonging to the more emotional aspects of the experience (McApline, Amundsen, & Turner, 2014). These are overlapping elements that relate to the trajectory of academic staff through different stages, which has led to a focus on individuals’ histories and pathways through academia. In their work, they focus on the “identity-trajectory” of PhD students and academic staff, as a way to see “identity development as an ongoing learning process (Geijsel & Meijers, 2005)—the continuity, the flow, of individual intention and experience across roles rather than within only one role” (McApline, Amundsen & Turner, 2014, p. 954). Notable is the fact that academic identities are not only about what we see in ourselves, but also how we think others perceive us and how others treat us (Mula et al., 2021). Due to the nature of universities, it is also important to consider how EC identity and status situates us in the academic community, highlighting a tension between “satisfying department/group goals and/or prioritizing their own goals and concerns” (Mula et al., 2021, p. 9).

Doherty’s (2023) piece focuses mainly on her experience into academia, but I think it would be interesting to consider how all of our pathways have shaped us and the way we work, both as EC staff and beyond. Some of us might have a particular teaching or tutoring style we adopted from an inspiring lecturer or professor, or we may have learned from the mistakes of others. Or we may be influenced by a previous profession or area of study which lends a

different perspective or approach to our teaching. Embracing our lived experience and how it impacts us makes us more relatable to students, minimizing the divide between academic and student. When I look back, it is often the professors or lecturers who shared part of their experience, sometimes their failures, that made them seem more human and the most influential. As an EC academic, I think it is important to model this for students, to help them to see where their path might lead them—whether that is out of the university or further in.

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