

The value of objects: how artefacts can enrich professional reflection and reflexivity.

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The value of objects: how artefacts can enrich professional reflection and reflexivity.

Jill Dickinson¹ and Teri-Lisa Griffiths

box[At a Glance] starts

- Explores how artefacts may be used to encourage reflection and reflexivity on professional development and career transitions between practice and Higher Education.
- Defines artefacts very broadly to include objects and tools that are made by humans and whether tangible or not; for example, a phone, a website, or a corporate strategy.
- Draws on a combined theoretical framework of professional identity, and sociomateriality (the dynamic relationship between humans and artefacts).
- Makes recommendations as to how universities could support pracademics' professional development and career transitions for the benefit of pracademics, students, and the institution.

box[At a Glance] ends

1 Introduction

This chapter draws on the concepts of both professional identity and sociomateriality to explore how artefacts can facilitate reflection and reflexivity to support pracademics' navigations of their career transitions, and future professional development.

First, professional identity includes knowledge, philosophy, professional roles and expertise, attitudes, behaviours, and interactions with other professionals (Woo et al., 2014), and collectively professional identities play a key role in organisational behaviour (Hay et al., 2021). Broadly, organisational behaviour comprises an entanglement of relationships around, for example, space and place, instruments, policies and procedures, reference points, groupings, systems, and specialisms (Orlikowski and Scott, 2008). In short, professional identity is about more than internal concepts of the professional self. We have previously explored the “fluid and context-dependent” nature of professional identity (Dickinson et al., 2020, p. 290), and further studies suggest how it comprises both self-perception and others' views of the individual “as a particular sort of person in a particular context at a particular time” (Beltman et al., 2015, p. 226). Within education, researchers have observed how the professional identity of academics within a teaching-specific context comprises feelings around being valued, a sense of belonging, self-efficacy, dedication, and visualising career development (van Lankveld et al., 2016). Further to this, it is important to recognise the potentially multi-faceted role of such tutors who may be required to publish research in addition to their teaching responsibilities. Within the broader context, across Higher Education (HE) within the UK, academic staff face increased scrutiny through

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performance evaluation programmes and associated metrics, focussed on research outputs and teaching quality. Mula et al. (2021) warn that this working environment could particularly influence the professional identity development of early career academics to the extent that they may develop unethical approaches to research whilst trying to navigate the multiple challenges presented around staff-student relations, work-life balance, and job security (Schaap et al., 2021).

Beltman explores how internal and external opinions about the future self are particularly important at any stage of an individual's professional development given that action plans for 'becoming' are founded upon them (2015, p. 225). Related to this, Khapova et al. demonstrate how professional identity in terms of both connection to, and networks within, a particular field can be a significant predictor for career change (2007). There are also suggestions that those with the ability to 'access multiple identity resources [a]re more likely to perceive a navigable pathway to a future professional self' (Bentley et al., 2019), for example from practice into academia to become a pracademic (Posner, 2009). Pracademics can play an important role in challenging norms, driving forward change (Friesen, 2021), and facilitating symbiotic theory and practice-development (Panda, 2014). Yet, research from Dickinson et al., (2020) illustrate how pracademics may face underlying personal challenges around their sense of professional identity. Their research reports findings of pracademics feeling the need to develop "liquid identities" and "shapeshift", for example as they introduce themselves to different audiences, perhaps as an academic, a lecturer, and/or a practitioner (2020, p. 300). Within the next section of this chapter, we consider the second concept of sociomateriality before we then draw on both lenses to explore how artefacts can be used to support processes of reflection and reflexivity for professional development.

Sociomateriality presents a distinct perspective in the context of organisational development. Broadly, sociomaterialism perceives the relationship between humans and materials as an "entanglement... of continuously performed intra-relations" (Hultin, 2019, p. 92). It is important to distinguish notions of sociomateriality from discussions around material culture theory. Whereas material cultural theory explores the relationship between humans and materials at a *particular* moment in time (Prown, 1982), sociomateriality focuses on the *dynamic* interface between humans and materials (de Moura and de Souza Bispo, 2019). It is therefore particularly relevant for this chapter as we encourage reflection on the development of professional identity over time. Orlikowski and Scott (2008) note how the sociomateriality approach examines three interrelated elements: technology (which is broadly defined to include any material tools used for work); work (including the actors within an organisation); and the organisation itself. This chapter draws on sociomateriality to consider the central role played by the material world in developing understandings around professional identity.

Humans have historically assigned meaning to material objects. In the eighteenth century, the British philanthropist, Thomas Coram, opened the Foundling Hospital in London. In recognition of the appalling living conditions of the poor at that time, it was a place where mothers, without the resources to care for their children, could hand them over to the charge of the hospital. For the first twenty years of the hospital's operation, mothers were each invited to leave a token to enable them to identify their children should they ever have the means to reclaim them into their care. These objects included buttons, coins, padlocks,

and scraps of fabric. Also referred to by Doel (2017), this example demonstrates how the meaning which humans ascribe to material (non-human) objects can have the effect of changing or transforming the object itself. What might, to the unknowing eye, appear to be unwanted, worthless items, instead become poignant symbols of familial love and identity.

The importance of artefacts is similarly apparent within the context of professional identity. Doel (2019) designed a project that used objects to tell the story of social work. Inviting anyone with a relationship to social work to submit objects with an accompanying story, the project revealed aspects of social work practice and culture beyond the professional context (Doel, 2019). In parallel with the meaning making of the Foundling Hospital mothers, Doel acknowledged how the narrative accompanying each object is critical to the construction of its meaning in the social work context. Within the same field, Scholar (2012) identifies how qualified social workers who supervise, educate, and assess students perceive dress and self-presentation as key elements of their professional identities. The importance of objects within the workplace has also been recognised within other disciplines. In their examination of the ways tables are used in various work settings, including roundtables and countertops, Conrad and Richter (2013) posit that “material artefacts like the table intervene in human interaction by structuring activities, promoting certain activities and restraining others.” (2013, p. 134) By way of example, table shapes can impose degrees of integration between participants. Roundtables invite discussion on an equal footing, whereas rectangular tables can be utilised to reinforce hierarchies. Lundin and Nulden (2007) explored the importance of workplace tools within the Swedish police service, such as communications technology and pepper spray, for generating conversations that facilitate organisational learning. In their study of chefs’ tools, Robinson and Baum (2019) acknowledge the mutable nature of the chef’s role and explored how the significance of artefacts can change according to temporal and spatial contexts. Their findings that chefs would keep artefacts as mementos after they ceased to use them for work is pertinent to the pracademic context.

Adopting these dual concepts of professional identity and sociomateriality, previous studies have employed artefacts to generate additional dimensions. The literature defines the term ‘artefact’ very broadly to include “any product of human activity” (Scholar, 2017, p. 634). Svensson and Gluch similarly argue that tangibility is not a pre-requisite; noting how “a mission statement, a strategic plan, an organizational chart, or an algorithm” could all be reified as objects as they may affect human agency within the institutional setting (2021, p. 42). Lundin and Nulden (2007) explain how ‘intellectual’ artefacts, such as language and behaviours, also play a central role because they provide practitioners with a route into understanding their contribution within the professional community.

Whilst the adoption of artefacts within the research setting has become increasingly common, it is important to understand the rationale. Artefacts are often used because of their human-made, representative, instrumental, and deliberate nature (Czerwinski, 2017), and their importance may also lie within their sense of permanence (Friedman, 2007). Yet, artefacts need to be brought to life, or vitalised, through human narrative (Makela, 2007) to trigger memories, reflection, and storytelling (Lundin and Nulden, 2007). Conversely, researchers need to be mindful that using artefacts may unduly narrow the discussion and risk missing consideration of the broader context (Birkhead, 2021).

Artefacts have also been used to encourage processes of reflection in broader contexts such as teaching and learning, and personal and professional development. Connected to this, there is a range of evidence demonstrating the importance of reflecting on experience for developing professional identity. Feucht et al. suggest how “mindful introspection, dialogues with peers about relevant and critical issues, and more systematic and rigorous participation in action research” can together “embod[y] the essence of being a professional” (2017, p. 234). They also advocate for such reflective practice to be combined with processes of reflexivity (namely considering the wider context of experiential learning) to change “practices, expectations, and beliefs” (p234). Alongside self-identity and resilience, reflexivity has also been classed as a “fundamental resource” for career development, particularly for driving more values-aligned decision-making (Tomassini, 2015, p. 275) which could prove particularly pertinent within the context of pracademia.

Against this backdrop, the chapter combines the concepts of professional identity and sociomateriality to explore how artefacts can be used to foster reflective and reflexive practice and help develop pracademics’ self-identification with their “knowledge, sets of skills, ways of being and values” (Trede et al., 2012, p. 380). It considers how and why pracademics may retain, discard, and/or further develop elements of their professional identity as they navigate their career journeys into HE. Through providing illustrative examples, the chapter seeks to encourage readers to consider which artefact(s) they would select to represent their own career transitions. In doing so, it also invites readers to draw on those artefacts to develop reflective and reflexive understandings around motivations for their own career journeys and how they might further develop a values-led approach as their professional identity evolves post-transition.

2 Methodology

The data reported in this chapter is from a case study conducted at a large British, post-1992², HE institution. We put out an open call for former or current practitioners who lecture within the institution, or pracademics, to take part in one of six focus groups. Forty-two participants took part from a range of disciplines and at different stages of their academic careers. Our research design was inspired by the work of Doel (2019) and aligns with the sociomaterial approach described above. Recognising how artefacts can support communication, and illustrate and illuminate phenomena (Thornquist, 2015), we invited each participant to bring an artefact which they felt represented their career transition from practice to academia. Out of the forty-two pracademics who participated in the focus groups, seventeen participants brought an artefact with them (which is something we will discuss further on in this section). Within each focus group, we encouraged participants to draw on their artefacts in generating insights into their experiences and the related cultural framework (Elliott, 2005). Findings from the focus group discussions centre around two key themes of practice-informed teaching and professional identities. This chapter specifically focuses on the participants’ choices of artefacts and the meanings behind them in terms of their professional identity development. We deliberately asked each participant to select an

² Former polytechnics or Higher Education colleges that were granted university status in the United Kingdom with the Further and Higher Education Act, 1992.

artefact ahead of their focus group to encourage pre-reflection and generate further insights during the discussions.

Following calls for social researchers to clarify their positionality (see, for example, Unluer, 2012), we feel that it is important to note our status as insider researchers at this point. We have both made the career transition from practice into academia; one as a lawyer and the other as a careers adviser and we both now hold academic roles within UK universities.

Before specifically considering some of the artefacts that the participants brought with them, it is useful to consider why some participants failed to bring an object to their focus group. Participants revealed how one of the reasons why they struggled with the task was a perception of clear divisions between their practice and their current teaching role.

Artefacts: yeah, the reality is that I think most artefacts that represent the work that I did sort of stayed at the office when I left it, I didn't take anything with me. So, all the artefacts I have are all to do with what I'm doing now really. I mean I've got certificates and stuff, but I have struggled to come up with something that was really relevant or that would have been something I could have brought with me here. (Participant A, focus group 1)

This account can provide some insight into the fluctuation of professional identity; this participant 'didn't take anything' with them from practice and any object that they could have produced is 'to do with what I'm doing now'. It is worthy of note that this participant has been a lecturer for a longer period of time than they were in practice, and their comments may suggest that they have made a secure transition from their previous professional identity (van Lankveld et al., 2016). Yet, the professional identities of pracademics may not necessarily be so dichotomous; perhaps they may be better conceived as comprising layers that an individual builds up over time. It is possible that such seams of professional identity may remain separate; for example, the quote above suggests very clear distinctions between professional identities that this participant has developed in practice and academia. Perhaps such layers of identity may also be woven together sometimes when individuals adapt elements of their professional identity from practice for the academic setting, whether knowingly or not.

In the next section of this chapter, we will explore artefacts chosen by seven of our participants and situate them within the context of the literature around both professional identity and sociomateriality.

3 Findings

The participants' selection of artefacts included both 'organisational artefacts' that enabled efficient working practice (Eriksson-Zetterquist et al., 2009) (including a mobile phone, a reference text, and a scale rule), and "totems" or "trophies" that held symbolic meaning (Robinson and Baum, 2019, p. 165) (for example, a doll, a thank-you letter, and a charm).

Congruent with the literature, some participants preferred to reflect on more symbolic 'tools', often involving either senses and/or skills that they had developed in their previous profession and which they could relate to their current context.

The artefact that I've brought is my ears [...] I mean because obviously as a journalist for many years, it's about listening to people [...] and following things up all the time and just listening for the clues, picturing what people are saying to you in order to make your programmes or do your interviews. I would like to think that I use that here as well, because part of my role as the joint course leader is pastoral, is the pastoral side and you know, following the students up who are not attending, finding out why they're not, and finding out that range of problems that are keeping them from coming in, and listening to them and devoting time to actually listen to them. (Participant G, focus group 5)

This participant has outlined how their existing professional skills assisted them with providing pastoral support in the transition to their role as a lecturer. This is arguably in contrast to Mula et al.'s study (2021) which focussed on postdoctoral identities and concluded that early-career academics experienced insecurity and uncertainty. Other participants similarly noted how they used specific senses that they had established in their previous practice to explore and reflect on their approach to teaching.

I'm also very aware that we learn incredibly well with our eyes, and I think that I'm incredibly mindful about the type of images I display in my class and how I use images as a means of generating an emotional response, a deeper layer of connectivity with the subject. So, I do spend a lot of time thinking about what I'm showing students because psychologically we're affected quite significantly by what we see, the subliminal messages. We're controlled [...] some architects design to make us feel how they want us to feel, to move us on quickly, to make us confused so we stay and maybe buy things, to make us want to buy things. There is a kind of- a level of how our surroundings influence us and how our images. So actually, if we can teach visually as well as verbally, I think that that's a skill that I've learnt." (Participant B, focus group 5)

Participant B has considered the importance of 'seeing' both as a mode of learning and how visual contexts influence the practice of architecture. This participant has employed their professional values as an architect to help them to make sense of their conceptualisation of the ideal tutor. In a similar way to the proceeding example, this account diverges from previous research that deems experience acquired before the academy as insufficient to support professional development as academics within a teaching-specific context (van Lankveld et al., 2016). As previously illustrated, the symbolic nature of these artefacts is not unusual. Doel (2019, p. 12) similarly had "metaphysical" submissions which fell outside of the scope of conventional objects, but which illuminated an aspect of practice or professional culture.

Those participants who brought material objects to their focus group selected a mixture of tools or items which had either practical use in their previous professional practice roles and/or symbolic significance for them. One participant highlighted how a certain tool was so integral to their professional practice that they had incorporated it into their teaching and assessment approaches.

My artefact is my phone because it's an essential tool of the journalist, because you film on it, you can record on it, talk to people on it, you talk to the office and every student has got one. So, I don't tell them to put phones away in lectures. [...] I tell them it's an important thing and you should always have it switched on. So that's a really good way of identifying

with them and we use phones a lot. They use their own phones in their assessments.
(Participant F, focus group 5)

Here, the participant is exploiting their professional knowledge, and potentially their students' awareness of their previous practice as an asset. It also supports the notion that tools are important to the development of practice. Lundin and Nulden (2007) conclude that talking about tools is an important method for teaching new recruits about practice. Participant F has retained the knowledge of their previous practice to support the development of those preparing to enter that profession, through identifying and encouraging the use of a specific 'tool of the trade'. Another participant had collected items that they had used in their work as a community safety officer.

The reason why I bought these as my artefacts is because it brings back some memories actually, some quite good memories of that time, because I did enjoy being a practitioner, but I think that from a teaching perspective, I think that they really highlight how you need to know the theory to be able to put things in to practice [...] So, all of these different materials are aimed at preventing crime and relate to something called the crime triangle, so routine activities theory. So, the premise is very basic level criminology, that for a crime to occur there need to be three things that happen at a single point in time: a motivated offender, a suitable target, and the lack of a capable guardian. So, all of these things somewhere try and break that crime triangle, by demotivating a motivator [...] and so I try and use those types of examples with students when I talk crime prevention about bringing a theory from the classroom and how it can translate, and you need to still be thinking about that theoretical side when they get a real-life job. (Participant D, focus group 2)

This example is ostensibly demonstrating how the participant wishes to emphasise to their students how theory can be applied in practice through real-world experience and the tools used in work. However, the participant is also revealing something of their professional values, namely that practice should be informed by theory. This values-first approach was something that the researchers saw repeatedly through the artefacts that participants produced.

I brought a little thank you that I got from a young person that I was working with who, we used to do quite a lot of longer-term work, so it's someone that I spent a lot of time with [...] I always keep that with me on my desk as a bit of a reminder of my time there [...] The reason why it influences me now is that when I'm working with the students in our childhood studies course a lot of them are going to go and work in some capacity with children [...] So, I just really try and hold that- how important it is really for them to do the best they can for every child and young person and family that they work with. That sometimes, well not sometimes, usually, systems get in the way of doing the best work you can and how important it is for them to just really try and, I guess, advocate for all those children that they're working with [...] and how that they can make a difference, even when it might feel like they can't. (Participant A, focus group 4)

Both preceding participants highlight the important role that values play in the way that pracademics reconceptualise their professional experiences and apply them to their teaching and research practice. Again, this challenges earlier research that focusses on the transition from practice into academia as disruptive in the context of professional values (Wood et al., 2016; Shreeve, 2011). These findings highlight how pracademics may find

constancy and security from the value-base developed in their previous practice (Dickinson et al., 2020). The immediately previous example artefact also highlights another facet of the objects selected; namely, their totemic, rather than utilitarian, appeal as symbolising the participants' experience and values. One participant explained how their totemic artefact instilled them with confidence when making the transition from practice into academia.

My [previous] colleagues bought me a star charm to make me remember as I left, what skills and attributes I'd got and that I was still a star. For me, this will sound quite weird, I've worn it [...] walking into a lecture theatre for the first time with a hundred students, to remember that I am actually still an expert in my field and in that department, when a lot of colleagues are talking about PhDs and research, which overwhelms me still I have to say, but keeps me remembering that I have got those skills and I have got something to give to learners, peers, colleagues. So, I do wear it on a daily basis. (Participant D, focus group 5)

Here, the participant reveals experiences which align with the disruptive nature of the pracademic transition reported in prior research (Gourlay, 2011). Finding themselves in a new, unfamiliar working environment and culture where 'colleagues are talking about PhDs and research', the participant discloses their need for reassurance about their worth. They suggest that their totemic artefact helps by reminding them how they were held in esteem by their former colleagues and that they 'have got something to give' within their new academic setting. This aligns with the authors' previous calls for universities to recruit pracademics and support their professional development to extol the benefits of a diverse academy (Dickinson et al., 2020). The theme of transition was similarly prominent for other participants. One reflected how their artefact (a Dictaphone they would use for transcription whilst they were in practice) prompted them to recall a moment of realisation.

I was sat in a multidisciplinary sort of department with people next to me who weren't lawyers and they certainly weren't from the sort of corporate background that I was from and suddenly I started not only to realise that there are other ways of being a professional, but that also I started to understand what I had been and what I had become and how I'd been trained into a particular type of beast. (Participant H, focus group 5)

These three examples of the gift from the young person, the star charm, and the Dictaphone together illustrate how artefacts can be selected for their symbolism in terms of the participant's feelings towards the transitional process and what it means for them.

The spatial dimension of this final reflection, with the participant experiencing an instant of comprehension once they had transitioned to their new 'multidisciplinary' working environment, aligns with previous findings around how the meaning of artefacts changes along with the working circumstances of the individual (Robinson and Baum, 2020). Pracademics, with their experience of "being in two camps" (Shreeve, 2011, p. 79), are uniquely placed to draw on any artefacts that they bring with them from practice into academia to support processes of reflection and reflexivity in developing their professional identities. This aspect will be explored within the discussion and conclusion that follows.

4 Conclusion

We will reiterate and draw together the key points made within this chapter around using the dual lenses of professional identity and sociomateriality.

First, recent attention has highlighted issues around the purpose of pracademics, and some of the challenges and opportunities arising from their potential roles (Campbell, 2022). Eacott (2021) similarly notes how the pracademia narrative is gathering momentum but cautions against perceptions of the pracademic's role as a panacea. Against this backdrop, the chapter has presented a timely discussion around how the dual notions of professional identity and sociomateriality are inextricably interweaved within this context, and how the combining these concepts, as we have done here, can be used to further develop understanding. The chapter has drawn on this theoretical framework to illuminate the distinctive, multifaceted, and iterative nature of pracademics' professional identities as they seek to navigate their career transitions from practice into academia whilst also retaining aspects of the professional identities that they developed as practitioners.

Second, the chapter has highlighted the importance of artefacts, and particularly within the broader workplace environment including, but not limited to, academia. We have identified how people may retain artefacts for a variety of reasons including to remind them of their tacit knowledge and skills, to recall memories of previous practice, and to evoke important professional values. The findings have also demonstrated how the purpose for which artefacts are retained may change over time; for example, a once useful item in the professional practice setting may be kept as a totemic reminder of the pracademic's career development and professional values. The findings from the case study have evidenced the potential for drawing on artefacts to support taking a reflective and reflexive approach to decision-making around professional development and career transitions. Whilst the case study designed-in artefacts to encourage focus group discussions within the research setting, there is potential for similarly using artefacts to support professional development discussions, for example within a mentoring or coaching setting. The research has evidenced how artefacts can be used to add another dimension to such sessions by encouraging recall, and reflective and reflexive practice around previous experience to help colleagues locate and understand their professional identity and sense of worth and develop their thoughts and ideas around further professional and careers development.

Third, the findings have illustrated the extent to which perhaps previously self-assured practitioners may rely on totems acquired from their time spent in practice to remind them of all that they have to offer, and what is important to them, as they make the transition into the academic environment. Our previous research called for university leaders to explicitly recognise the skills, knowledge, and experiences that pracademics bring with them and to nurture and support the further development of these attributes within the academic setting (Dickinson et al., 2020). Whilst there is evidence that some initiatives have been developed which may help to address these concerns (for example, the online Pracademia Network as part of Advance HE Connect, and the Academic Careers Framework, which equates practice experience and engagement with research development (Sheffield Hallam University, 2022), this chapter highlights the potential for developing other opportunities. These could include, for example, adopting similarly creative approaches to

developing induction and training programmes. Such opportunities could also serve to crystallise what newer pracademics wish to convey about their professional values and identity in their new academic role.

Finally, it is important to identify a potential limitation of the case study. As highlighted within the methodology, only forty percent of participants brought an artefact with them to the focus groups. Whilst we earlier suggested some rationale for such a decision, for example because the pracademic has made a full transition from practice to academia and no longer sees the relevance of their past professional identity, there may also be other reasons for non-engagement with this element. As Dickinson et al. (2022) suggest, creative methodologies can create uncertainties for participants about what is required. Cultural differences may also play a factor, with participants questioning the implication and value of objects for understanding their experience. There is scope for future research to explore this further.

[Box 'Points for reflection' starts]

- If you were asked to select an object which represents your professional life, what would you choose?
- Think about why you selected your chosen object. Does it provide some insight into your professional identity?
- If you are preparing to transition into a new profession, or you have done so previously, what knowledge, skills and values will you bring with you from your previous practice?

[Box 'Points for reflection' starts]

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