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Identity Transformation in a Cross-Departmental Teaching Community: Experiences of Academics at a Research-Intensive University in China

Ming Cheng [a], Qijuan Shen[b] and Sanfa Cai[c]

[a]Sheffield Institute of Education, Sheffield Hallam University, UK; [b]Institute of Higher Education, Shanghai Normal University, China; [c]Institute of Higher Education, Tongji University, China

*Ming Cheng

Email: M.Cheng@shu.ac.uk

Address:
Sheffield Institute of Education
College of Social Sciences and Arts
Sheffield Hallam University
Charles Street Room 12.4.01
City Campus, S1 2NE
UK

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Literatures acknowledge that cross-departmental teaching communities are invaluable in providing academics with space to share knowledge, build capacity, and nurture collegial academic identity that values teaching. There is a paucity of research on how academics engage with these communities in Chinese universities, and how they experience identity transformation in the process. Using the social learning theory of Community of Practice, this study explores how academics developed their identities in a cross-departmental teaching community at a Chinese research-intensive university which is undergoing a national general education reform. This study reveals that academics experienced identity tensions and different trajectories of identity transformation when they sought to reconcile their memberships of departmental and cross-departmental teaching communities. Seniority, contract type, and supportiveness of the work environment are important factors that influenced these academics' experiences. The study proposes that building a supportive work environment at departmental and cross-departmental levels, and refining promotion and reward policies to increase recognition of teaching, can nurture academic identity that values teaching. The findings offer important insights for universities in China and internationally on building cross-departmental teaching communities to support academics' teaching development.

Keywords: teaching community; academic identity; identity transformation; communities of practice; Chinese research-intensive university

Introduction

Recent literature on academic identities acknowledges the importance of building teaching communities in universities (Foreman-Brown, Fitzpatrick, and Twyford 2023; Laiho, Jauhiainen, and Jauhiainen 2020; McCune 2019; Tülübaş and Göktürk 2023). Teaching communities refer to various kinds of formal and informal organisations offering social space

for academics' professional development in teaching (Benhow and Lee 2019; Gast, Schildkamp, and van der Veen 2017; Zou 2019). These communities are described as useful in supporting academics to share knowledge and build capacity for teaching (Cox 2013; Furco and Moely 2012; Heinrich 2015). There is growing interest in whether and how academics' participation in these communities would foster collegial academic identity that values teaching (Hakkola et al. 2021; Krause 2014; Myllykoski-Laine et al. 2023; van Lankveld et al. 2017).

Teaching communities are usually recognised to be at their strongest at departmental level (Knight and Trowler 2000; Lauer and Wikesmann 2019). However, it is worthwhile attempting to 'blur and shift traditional "tribal" disciplinary boundaries' (Green et al. 2017, 175) to provide cross-departmental space for teaching development and identity formation experiments (Houghton et al. 2015; Krause 2014). The reason is two-fold. First, teaching in higher education increasingly involves complex agendas and subjects (such as sustainable development) which require collaboration of academics from a wide range of disciplines (Pharo et al. 2014). Second, many academics struggle to find like-minded colleagues within their own departments, and they are reported to benefit from cross-departmental networks (Benhow and Lee 2019; Krause 2014).

There is a growing number of studies that explore cross-departmental teaching communities in universities. Some focus on the design and implementation of highly structured and project-based teaching workgroups, drawing lessons mainly from organisers' and facilitators' perspectives (Clavert et al. 2018; Nkambule and Tang 2024; Pharo et al. 2014). Other studies investigate the impacts of group interaction within teaching development programmes (Warhurst 2008; Osman and Hornsby 2016). Limited attention has been paid to cross-departmental teaching communities as an 'on-going, open and evolving learning space' (Green et al. 2013, 251) wherein academics experience identity transformation.

Research suggests that there is conflict between academics' engagement with cross-departmental teaching community and their memberships of departmental community, because these communities might have different teaching practices and values (Houghton et al. 2015; Osman and Hornsby 2016; Warhurst 2008). There is also identity tension between research and teaching roles, due to academics' fears that their commitment to teaching communities might marginalise them from the research-valued communities in universities (Skelton 2013; Warhurst 2008). Limited research has been conducted to explore how academics tackle these identity tensions to achieve identity transformation, and what factors influence their experiences.

This study will address this gap and explore academics' experiences of identity transformation in a cross-departmental teaching community at a research-intensive university in China. This university is chosen because it has been participating since 2008 in a national reform concerning general education, which brings changes to academic work through renewing undergraduate education.

The official name of the general education reform is Tongshi education. As it is broadly equivalent to the western idea of general education, the term general education is used in this paper. The reform aims to explore ways of teaching that promote students' knowledge breadth, supporting them not only in professional development but also preparing them for the complexities and uncertainties of civic and personal life (Jiang 2014). The process of national reform began as institutional experiments in a few leading research-intensive universities and has now been adopted in all Chinese universities as an important organisational strategy to promote teaching quality.

A large body of literature has explored how Chinese universities learned from Western ideas of liberal education and liberal arts curricula to develop their own practices of general education (Mou 2021; Postiglione 2016; Shen 2019; Zha 2021). The general education reform

aims to tackle two major concerns about academics' teaching roles in Chinese research-intensive universities. One concern is that academics prioritise research activities because these are more valued by universities' reward systems (Huang, Pang, and Yu 2018). The other concern is that academics rarely consider teaching beyond their subjects. As a result, the need for students' well-rounded development, and the role of academics as teachers to promote that development, are often ignored (Yan and Zhang 2024).

The general education reform has been building cross-departmental teaching communities in Chinese universities. It encourages academics to develop and teach general education courses that are either discipline-based introductory courses or cross-disciplinary topics such as sustainable development (Liao 2012). These courses are designed for all undergraduate students regardless of their disciplinary background and they require academics to consider how their teaching could support students' development beyond professional learning (Zhang 2012). About a fifth of academics in each university have been involved in teaching these general education courses, and their participation is voluntary in most cases (Shen 2019). In each university, these academics are from different departments and they constitute a fairly loosely organised cross-departmental teaching community (Shen 2019). Institutional initiatives such as university-facilitated workshops, meetings and teaching grants have been launched to support cross-departmental communication and collaboration among these teachers (Liao 2012).

Existing studies have explored academics' understanding of the idea of general education and how they implement it in their teaching (Liao 2012; Shen 2019; Zhang 2012). There is limited research on how academics engage with the teaching community of general education. This study uses the concept of Community of Practice (CoP) to interpret how academics engage with the cross-departmental teaching communities and their experiences of identity transformation during the process.

The concept of CoP is chosen for two reasons. Firstly, it captures the core features of the teaching community of general education. A CoP is defined as a system of collective critical inquiry and reflection focused on building a shared identity and intelligence garnered over time (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2015). The teaching community of general education is constituted by academics who are united by the value of general education and committed to exploring effective ways of teaching from diverse disciplinary backgrounds. This community is distinct from other types of professional groups such as professional learning communities that mainly focus on training projects, and teaching teams that are task-driven. (Bultoc 2024). Secondly, CoP has been widely used in research to explore identity formation and transformation underlying academics' practices within and across communities (Farnsworth, Kleanthous, and Wenger-Trayner 2016). Existing CoP literature provides helpful tools for research design and data analysis of academic identity changes in general education. This will be elaborated in the literature review section below.

Literature review

A teaching community of practice

The term 'teaching community of practice' (teaching CoP) refers to a group of academics who communicate, participate and are engaged in shared teaching-related practice (Green et al. 2013; Houghton et al. 2015). Some teaching CoPs form around shared teaching tasks and teaching development activities (Osman and Hornsby 2016; Warhurst 2008), and others are intentionally built to support organisational changes (Brown and Peck 2018; Bultoc 2024; Clavert et al. 2018; Houghton et al. 2015).

It is worth noting that not every community can be regarded as a CoP (Ng and Pemberton 2013). This is because the concept CoP highlights the social process where the members communicate and interact to develop shared knowledge about the practice

(Farnsworth, Kleanthous, and Wenger-Trayner 2016). There are two main approaches to analyse this 'social process': collective and individual approaches (Cox 2005; Ryan 2015). The collective approach focuses on how the group of people work together to solve problems and generate new knowledge, and it explores conflict and interaction between CoP members (Annala and Mäkinen 2017; Clavert et al. 2018). The individual approach investigates whether and how individual members take on the mutually negotiated meanings and practices. It focuses on individuals' identity formation and transformation during their participation in a community, as well as identity tension caused by multi-membership of different communities (Houghton et al. 2015; Jawitz 2009). This study takes the individual approach to explore individual academics' experiences of identity tension and transformation in the general education CoP.

Identity tensions in cross-departmental teaching CoPs

Studies show that participation in cross-departmental teaching CoPs is important for academics in developing their teaching knowledge, skills, confidence and connection with liked-minded colleagues (Bultoc 2024; Green et al. 2013; Hakkola et al. 2021; Osman and Hornsby 2016; Warhurst 2008). However, there is reported conflict between academics' memberships of departmental community and cross-departmental teaching CoP, because these two communities may value different practices of teaching (Annala and Mäkinen 2017; Warhurst 2008). For example, Warhurst (2008) found that introducing new ideas from cross-departmental teaching CoPs could be unsuccessful because the local departments are committed to their established ways of teaching.

Academics' experiences of cross-departmental teaching CoPs also involve the tension between researcher and teacher roles (Skelton 2013; Warhurst 2008; Zou 2019). When the research element of academic identity is emphasised and reinforced through power and reward

structures at department and university levels, academics tend to perceive teaching as less important, and hence reduce their commitment to teaching CoPs (Warhurst 2008). This is a key reason for the weak communal characteristics of teaching in universities, and academics' lack of belonging to teaching communities (van Lankveld et al. 2017). The teaching/research tension poses challenge to the development of teaching CoPs within and across departments (Krause 2014).

Studies suggest that senior staff are more likely to commit to cross-departmental teaching CoPs because they care more about the institution than junior staff (Houghton et al. 2015; Zou 2019). In contrast, junior staff are reported to be more concerned about teaching and research within their local departments, and they perceive the cross-departmental teaching CoPs as less relevant to their professional survival and progression. This disparity highlights the need to investigate the different ways that academics tackle identity tensions and experience identity transformation when they participate in cross-departmental teaching CoPs.

Wenger's (1998) delineation of three modes in which individuals develop identification with a CoP will be used as the framework in this study to interpret academics' experiences. The term 'identification' is used to convey that an individual develops and transforms their identity as a practitioner through interacting with the mutually negotiated meanings within the CoP they participate in (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2015). These three key modes of identification are: (1) *Engagement*: how individuals act in the CoP; (2) *Imagination*: how individuals construct an image of the CoP and one's own position within it as an orientation for practice; (3) *Alignment*: how individuals reconcile membership of this CoP with other memberships. This study will use these three modes in the research design and data analysis to investigate how individual academics at a research-intensive university in China develop their professional identities as part of a general education CoP. The participants' experiences of each mode will be explored in depth, to identify the influencing factors underlying each mode.

Methodology

This study is developed around two research questions:

(1)   How do academics in China experience identity transformation with the general education CoP?

(2)   What are the key factors that influence the academics' experiences of identity transformation?

A qualitative case study approach (Stake 1995) was chosen as it allows in-depth consideration of the nature of the general education reform in China, relevant contextual factors, and how academics experience identity transformation with the general education CoP. University X (anonymised) was selected as an instrumental case for this study to advance the understanding of academics' identify transformation. It is one of the 39 research-intensive universities where the general education reform was initiated (Shen 2019). As a public and multi-disciplinary university located in Southeast China, University X has about 3,500 full-time faculty members of which one in five are involved in teaching general education courses. The university uses teaching awards and curriculum development grants to support academics' commitment to these courses, but the monetary and career-related rewards are minor compared with those linked to research activities. The main incentive for academics' participation in the general education CoP is the opportunity to explore teaching with like-minded colleagues. University X also provides teaching training activities such as seminars, workshops and conferences. A General Education Committee, constituted by deans of all the colleges and several heads of departments, was established to lead the reform activities and it receives support from the university's administrative office for daily management.

Data collection and analysis

Semi-structured interviews were used as the main data collection method to encourage participants to share their experiences in depth. Twenty-one academics took part in the study. The interviews began by asking participants about their work experiences, recent commitments in academic work, and future plans. Then the focus moved to their personal experiences of the general education CoP including teaching, interaction with colleagues, training activities, and factors influencing their experiences. The participants also reflected on how they saw their development in the role as teachers of general education, and their experiences of identity tension and transformation.

Participants were recruited from a list of academics who were teaching or had taught general education courses by the time of the fieldwork. The list was provided by the university's administrative office. Of the 21 academics who took part in the interviews (Table 1), 14 are professors (University X encourages senior academics to take responsibilities in teaching general education courses). Male academics make up the majority of participants (15/21) because University X has a high ratio of male to female senior academics. All interviewees worked full time and were on tenure-track at the time of interview. They all had teaching experience prior to teaching general education courses.

Insert Table 1 here

All the interviews took place in the participants' offices and lasted from 35 to 70 minutes. The interviewees were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time with no consequences. The interviews were conducted in the Mandarin language, the first language of the interviewees and the researchers, and then translated into English by using a professional translation service.

Thematic analysis (Ryan and Bernard 2000) was conducted. Open coding was carried out to develop the initial codes by identifying recurring words, phrases and ideas. The codes were organised according to the three modes of identification: engagement, imagination, alignment. Under each mode, the interviewees' experiences were analysed and interpreted. Different combinations of the three modes were identified to present how the interviewees experienced identity transformation in the general education CoP.

Findings

There are significant differences in the interviewees' experiences of developing identification with the general education CoP at University X. Differences are identified in all three modes of identification: engagement, imagination and alignment (See Table 2).

Insert Table 2 here

Across the profiles of the participants' modes of identification, patterns emerge which represent different stories about their experiences of the general education CoP and identity tension and transformation. These patterns of experience were classified as the brokers' story, the old-timers' story, the exiles' story, and the tourists' story. The brokers are academics who actively transfer and translate knowledge between their departmental communities and the general education CoP to develop academic identities that value both teaching and research. The old-timers are those who have long been committed to teaching general education courses and endeavouring to develop the CoP with their teaching expertise. The exiles have withdrawn, or intend to withdraw, from the CoP due to their frustrating teaching experiences and the perceived unsupportive work environment. The tourists report low-level participation in the general education CoP due to the intensified pressure to deliver research productivity, with identities hardly changed by their teaching experiences of general education.

The brokers

In the CoP literature, brokers are regarded as important change agents for the development of communities through boundary-crossing activities (Clavert et al. 2018; Wenger 1998). In this study, seven interviewees have acted as brokers (02, 03, 09, 10, 12, 13, 17) and they are from psychology, literature, philosophy, mathematics, and history. Six of them are professors and one is a mid-career associate professor (02).

These brokers actively transferred and translated knowledge between departmental communities and the general education CoP. They reported transformative engagement with the CoP through teaching activities and participation in cross-departmental workshops and meetings. Their experiences increased their awareness of the importance of students' development and how they could influence it. For example, a male professor interviewee shared his experiences of using research to benefit students:

> I asked myself why academic research matters to students... These questions are easier if you're training …a specialist…. But now I consider [the question] more from students' perspectives. (12)

The brokers described their transformation from 'researchers who teach' to 'academics who care about teaching and students' (10). This indicates alignment between their teaching and research roles. For example, they developed general education courses based on their research expertise, and they got good research ideas through interaction with students, especially those from different disciplinary backgrounds. Moreover, some brokers (02, 03, 09, 13, 17) reported their increasing interest in pedagogical research based on their teaching experiences. For example, one professor interviewee with more than five years in the general education CoP shared his experience:

> This [general education] course became an interesting case...to discuss what we want students to learn… and how…to support them…We now have a team [with members

from] my department [literature] and education department…doing pedagogical research. (03)

The brokers' positive experiences are related not only to personal agency, but also supportive work environments. They mentioned good supports from both departmental and cross-departmental levels, such as cooperative curriculum development projects and university-facilitated teaching development activities. These initiatives were reported to encourage them to explore ways of teaching and connecting with colleagues within and out of departments, contributing to their positive imagination of personal development within the general education CoP. A professor interviewee explained this view explicitly:

[At our department] we started a project to encourage experienced and less experienced younger academics to work together [on general education courses] …. We wanted to do it in a collaborative and sustainable way… We've developed a group of high-quality courses. (17)

Existing research has found that departmental CoPs usually resist educational reforms stemming from university level and stick to their established ways of teaching (Annala and Mäkinen 2017; Warhurst 2008). However, the brokers' stories in this research reveal that the CoP's practices within a department could provide support for university-wide change and the formation of new cross-departmental CoPs, if the departmental community has teaching-valued cultures and practices. This is largely because academics' identification with their teaching roles could be enhanced when they perceive the work environment as collegial and supportive (Lauer and Wikesmann 2019; van Lankveld et al. 2017), and the enhanced identification could support their exploration of new ideas and practices of teaching. These findings are also consistent with existing research showing that a psychologically safe CoP space can provide opportunities for faculty members to explore teaching innovation (Bultoc 2024; Nkambule and Tang 2023).

The old-timers

Old-timers here refer to those who have mastered the norms and competences over a long period of practice (Wenger 1998). Five interviewees (01, 11, 14, 19, 21) are identified as old-timers. They had been long committed to teaching foundational courses (such as basic physics) which were re-labelled as general education courses during the reform. Compared with other academics who only started teaching general education courses since the reform, these five interviewees are old-timers in this area. They were all on teaching-focused contracts, unlike other participants who were on teaching-and-research contracts. They constituted a multidisciplinary group: politics, physics, mathematics, and history.

These old-timers reported transformative engagement, particularly highlighting their perceptions of greater appreciation for their work, which is recognised as an important element in developing academic identity that values teaching (van Lankveld et al. 2017). The old-timers reported that 'efforts in teaching become more appreciated among colleagues' (21) and the general education CoP is perceived to foster teaching-valued culture in this research-intensive university. This contributed to their positive imagination of their roles as experienced and engaged teachers who develop the general education CoP. For example, an assistant professor interviewee felt valued in the general education CoP:

> The University used to ignore discussions [about how to be a good teacher] …. We [teaching-focused staff] have a lot to offer in this regard… Many of us now are invited to give workshops on teaching. (14)

Concerning alignment of research and teaching, the old-timers reported negative experiences which they mainly attributed to 'a systematic research-teaching separation' (19) on the campus. They argued that institutional policies and practices made it difficult for them to develop mutual and deep communication with research-and-teaching focused academics.

We [teaching-focused staff] are separate from the mainstream [research-and-teaching focused staff] .... [We] have separate networks… It's somehow unusual to connect [with them]. (19)

Existing CoP literature highlights the power tensions between old-timers and newcomers, with the former usually exerting a larger degree of control (Green et al. 2013; Jawitz 2009). However, in this study, the old-timers appear to be relatively marginalised in relation to their research-and-teaching focused colleagues (newcomers to the general education CoP). The main reason lies in the wider organisational structure, where research and teaching are treated as separate, and research activities are more valued (e.g., McCune 2019; Tülübaş and Göktürk 2023). This will be further discussed in the tourists' story.

The exiles

Three interviewees (04, 08, 18) are exiles from the general education CoP. They include relatively young (04) and experienced academics (08, 18), and from different disciplines: literature, law, sociology. These interviewees had attempted to commit to their role of general education teachers but found the experience frustrating due to the lack of a supportive work environment. As a result, they 'exiled' themselves from the CoP. Interviewee 08 decided to withdraw after teaching general education courses for only one year. Interviewees 04 and 18 were still teaching at the time of interview, but their descriptions of their role made it clear that they regarded teaching just as 'a task assigned and to be done' (04), in sharp contrast with the stance of the brokers and the old-timers.

Although frustrated by their teaching experiences, the exiles' accounts of their engagement suggest that the CoP process was transformative. The exiles embraced the idea of general education to promote students' breadth of knowledge, but their personal experiences and observations of others led them to regard the relevant teaching practice as 'more problematic than fruitful' (18). However, this sense of conflict led them to critically review the

effectiveness of the general education reform, and to explore their own ways of being teachers who have deep care and concern for student development.

> The general education (reform) is not promoting good teaching. Rather it allows laziness…. People [academics and students] don't treat it seriously, [because] it's irrelevant [to students' majors]. (08)

The exiles' frustrations are also associated with the departmental work environment which they perceive as unsupportive. This environment contributes to the exiles' negative imagination of the general education CoP as merely manifesting policy rhetoric which fails to change teaching culture.

> The departments don't care about how you teach [general education]. They're more concerned about the core programme [for students' professional development]. (04)
> General education seems to be something big in the documents, but when you check policies and other arrangements [within departments], the fact is that nobody cares about your efforts…. When the leaders stop talking [about it], it would be gone soon. (18)

The exiles mentioned difficulties in forging alignment between their teaching and research roles, describing their teaching commitment being hampered by 'the pressure to get research grants and publications' (08). In general, the exiles' stories could be read in opposition to those of the brokers, in the sense that the lack of a supportive work environment, especially at departmental level, constrains academics' identification with the cross-departmental CoP (van Lankveld et al. 2017). These findings resonate with existing studies indicating that CoP's practices locally are the key to enabling individual academic members' engagement with university-wide educational reforms (Annala and Mäkinen 2017; Bultoc 2024; Clavert et al. 2018).

The tourists

In the CoP literature, tourists refer to those who have low levels of participation, with their

identities hardly changed by the experience (Fenton-O'Creevy et al. 2015). Six interviewees (05, 06, 09, 15, 16, 20) in this study acted as tourists, including three senior academics (09, 16, 20), one mid-career (06) and two junior academics (05, 15). They represent a diverse set of disciplines, from the arts to hard science.

These tourists, despite recognising some positive impacts of their general education experiences, such as more interaction with students, reported a pragmatic form of engagement. Specifically, they teach general education courses mainly because they are required by the university to deliver a certain number of teaching hours, and teaching general education courses is regarded as 'requiring less time and efforts, because they are not the core elements of the undergraduate programme' (20). The tourists also avoided attending voluntary meetings and workshops related to general education. They attributed their low-level engagement to the intensified pressure on them to be productive researchers, and reported problems with the alignment between their teaching and research roles.

> If I had more time, I would have developed my [general education] course better… But the reality is that I have to focus on research as much as possible at this stage. (16)

The junior and mid-career interviewees expressed their feelings of insecurity around spending time on general education teaching which was perceived to bring little recognition in promotion and tenure applications.

> Teaching doesn't count much when you compete for a professor position. When you become a successful researcher, you could get teaching opportunities easily. In fact, your teaching commitment will be more valued then… But if you don't have a good research profile, you'll lose all chances. (06)

These findings echo existing research (McCune 2019; Skelton 2013; Warhurst 2008) that suggests a commitment to teaching could be regarded as a 'poisoned chalice' (Skelton 2013, 916) when research performance is more valued in institutional policies and practices.

According to Skelton (2013), this distance between research and teaching indicates a problematic trajectory of academics marginalising themselves from teaching communities. The tourists in this study perceived the membership of the general education CoP as separate from their departmental membership, and they failed to develop positive imaginations about their development within the general education CoP. Their experiences are similar to those reported in the literature about early-career academics who regard cross-departmental teaching CoPs as less relevant to their professional survival (Osman and Hornsby 2016; Zou 2019).

Discussion

This study contributes to the debate on how academics participate in cross-departmental teaching CoPs (Clavert et al. 2018; Green et al. 2013; Houghton et al. 2015; Nkambule and Tang 2024; Warhurst 2008). Previous studies have mainly explored academics' identity tensions due to organisational structures that place more weight on research performance than teaching contribution (Houghton et al. 2015; Myllykoski-Laine et al. 2024; Tülübaş and Göktürk 2023; Warhurst 2009). This study focuses on the different approaches that academics use to deal with the tensions. Using the three modes of identification as a framework, this study finds four different trajectories of identity transformation where academics seek to reconcile their memberships of the cross-departmental teaching community and departmental community, and juggle their dual roles of teaching and research. The analysis also reveals the key factors influencing academics' experiences, such as academics' seniority, contract type, and supportiveness of the work environment.

Existing research suggests that senior staff are more likely to successfully reconcile their memberships of the cross-departmental teaching community and the departmental community while junior staff tend to report these two memberships as separate and even conflicting (Houghton et al. 2015; Zou 2019). This research reveals that academics'

experiences of reconciling the memberships are influenced not only by their seniority, but also the perceived supportiveness of the work environment. All the junior staff participating in this study are identified as either exiles or visitors (Interviewees 04, 05, 08, 15) who struggled to reconcile their membership of the general education CoP with the departmental community. This echoes Zou's findings (2019) that junior academics are more likely to prioritise commitment to teaching and research within their own departments, and to perceive cross-departmental teaching CoPs as less relevant to professional survival and success. However, some participating senior staff (Interviewees 06, 09, 16, 18, 20 who have worked more than twenty years in University X) also had difficulties reconciling their two memberships. For example, Interviewee 18 was exiled from the general education CoP while four others (Interviewees 06, 09, 16, 20) behaved like tourists, reporting low-level participation in the general education CoP and indicating that their identities hardly changed. These patterns suggest that there are other important factors shaping academics' experiences.

The data revealed that having a supportive work environment at departmental level could make a big difference to the academics' experience. The brokers in this study reported the positive impacts of departmental strategies and arrangements such as collegial discussions and collaboration in curriculum development. These are perceived to constitute a supportive environment and enrich academics' positive imaginations of their own development within the general education CoP. By contrast, the exiles, although positive about the idea of general education, were discouraged by the absence of a supportive environment, due to colleagues' lack of recognition of the value of teaching general education courses. Here, the study confirms previous research findings that where a departmental culture values teaching there are positive impacts on academics' development in their teaching roles (Laure and Wikesmann 2019; Myllykoski-Laine et al. 2024; van Lankveld et al. 2017). It is worth mentioning that these earlier studies mainly focused on teaching roles associated with department-based and faculty-

based communities, whereas the present study extends to cross-departmental university-level teaching communities. Moreover, all the four stories identified in our study involve academics from different disciplinary backgrounds, suggesting that it is the departmental environment, rather than a particular culture associated with a discipline, which plays a significant role in the ways academics develop identification with teaching CoPs (Krause 2014).

Existing literature highlights the tension between researcher and teacher roles as an obstacle for faculty participation in teaching CoPs (Skelton 2013; Tülübaş and Göktürk 2023; Warhurst 2008). This tension is reported to be aggravated in China's general education reform because academics have found that general education teaching requires much more preparation than subject-specialist teaching and perceive it as less relevant to their research work (Yan and Zhang 2024). In this study, the research/teaching tension is confirmed but different groups of academics reported different experiences of aligning the dual roles. Academics' seniority and contract type are influential factors. In general, junior and mid-career academics (mostly the visitors and exiles) reported struggling to participate in the general education CoP, due to the pressure of survival and promotion on the tenure track. In the case of more experienced academics, experiences differ according to contract type. The old-timers on teaching-focused contracts reported feelings of separation from research-and-teaching focused colleagues. By contrast, the brokers (mostly senior professors with security of tenure) highlighted connections, rather than tensions, between teaching and research. These differences resonate with McCune's (2019) argument that the relationships between research and teaching are complex and enacted differently by academics in diverse contexts.

The findings of this study have important implications for university- and department-level strategies to support academics to engage fully in cross-departmental teaching CoPs and to develop identities that value teaching. Firstly, a supportive departmental work environment is key for academics participating in teaching CoPs within and across departments. A

supportive environment could be built through practices such as regular collegial discussions about teaching, and cooperative curriculum development projects. Deans and heads of departments should encourage these practices, and in doing so send faculty a clear message that teaching is valued as a shared endeavour among colleagues. Secondly, the supportive environment could be cultivated also at university level through initiatives such as teaching development workshops and projects, and grants and rewards for teaching improvement efforts. Such initiatives could encourage academics to explore good teaching practice and to connect with colleagues within and beyond departments. They could also provide opportunities for contact between teaching-focused and research-and-teaching focused academics to develop collegial academic identities. Thirdly, junior and mid-career academics are more likely to show low-level participation in cross-departmental teaching CoPs due to their experiences of the pressure to survive professionally and to meet tenure track criteria which privilege research. These experiences contribute little to the development of their teaching roles. Universities and departments therefore need to review their promotion and reward policies to motivate junior and mid-career faculty members to participate in teaching CoPs.

Conclusion

This study explores academics' experiences of identity transformation with the general education CoP, a cross-departmental teaching community, at a Chinese research-intensive university. It contributes to current debates on community-based teaching development in higher education. Findings of this study confirm that cross-departmental teaching CoPs can support faculty members to develop collegial academic identities that value teaching, because the CoPs provide invaluable opportunities to communicate and interact with like-minded colleagues. The study reveals the different trajectories of identity transformation that academics experience as they seek to balance the roles of teaching and research and to reconcile

their memberships of the cross-departmental teaching community and the departmental community. The key factors shaping these different experiences include academics' seniority, contract type, and supportiveness in the work environment.

The findings of this study offer important insights for universities in China and internationally on how to support academics, in the course of participation in cross-departmental teaching CoPs, to develop academic identities that value teaching. For example, building more supportive work environments at university- and department-level is vital, and it is strongly recommended that institutions review their promotion and reward policies to give more weight to academics' efforts in teaching .

Research in future could focus on the experiences of newcomers, and those who have disengaged with or dropped out of cross-departmental teaching CoPs. Learning more about the experiences of these newly appointed staff would help us to understand better the factors constraining the development of cross-departmental teaching CoPs in universities.

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