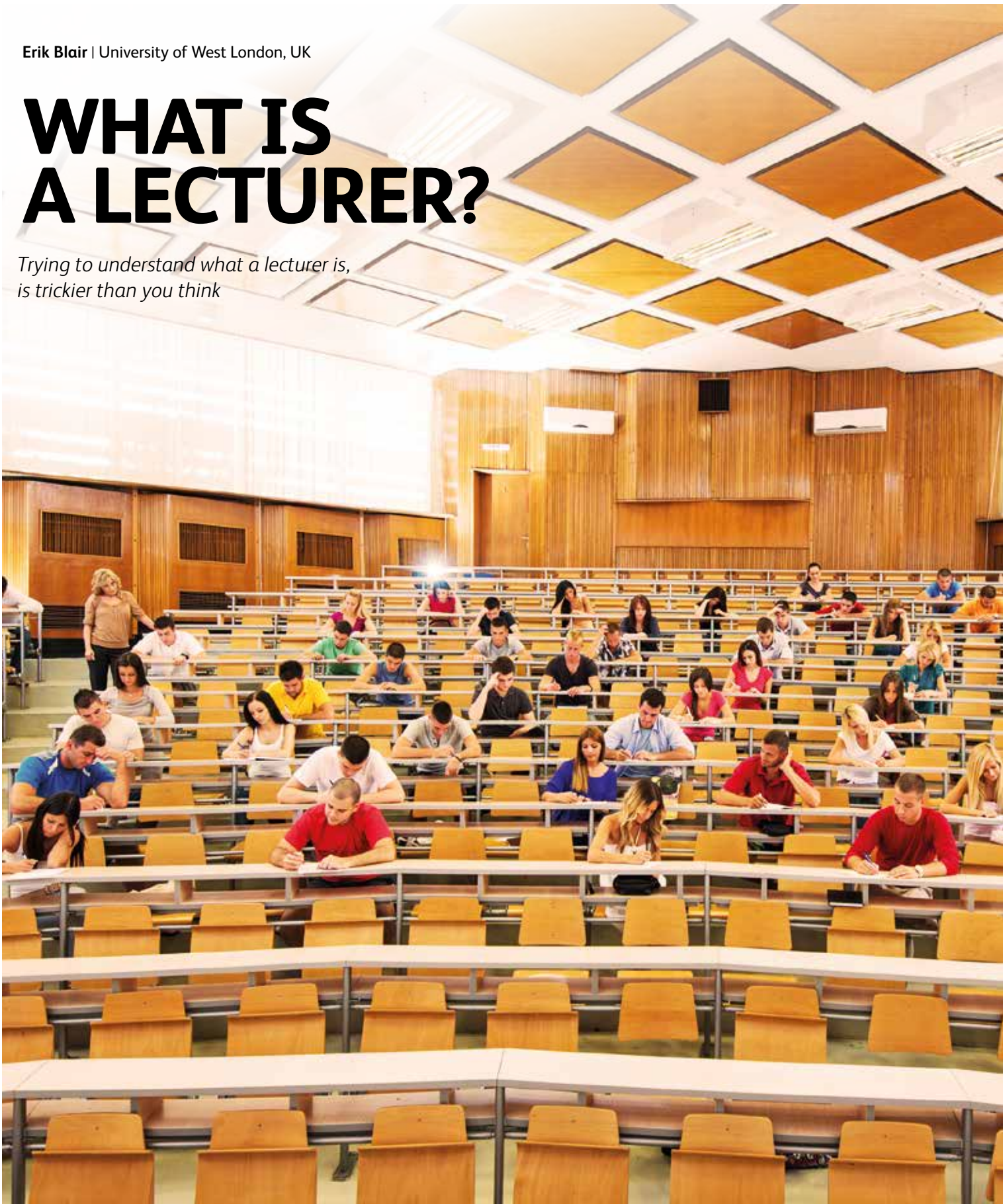


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WHAT IS A LECTURER?

Trying to understand what a lecturer is, is trickier than you think





Becoming a lecturer 'is not a simple matter, with almost a decade required to prepare an individual for even an entry-level role' (Coates & Goedegebuure, 2012, p.876). With so much effort involved it might be worthwhile trying to find out just what a lecturer is. A quick internet search using the term 'lecturer' will give you a surface definition but this definition might be somewhat limited in scope – focussing on the duties and responsibilities of working in Higher Education. Here I dig below surface definitions and start to explore the interaction of various personal and professional definitions. In doing so I hope to move the conversation beyond a discussion of what a lecturer *does* and instead focus on exploring what a lecturer *is*.

Disciplinary roots

Everyone who teaches in Higher Education has their own approach to teaching and, because everyone who teaches in Higher Education has had a personal experience of being taught, almost everyone has their own understanding of what a lecturer might be (and almost everyone has something to say about teaching). However, being a lecturer is not just one easily defined thing. Many individuals develop their conception of what it is to be a lecturer in Higher Education through engaging with their pre-formed ideas about how their subject should be taught and learned. Their understanding of the role is rooted in their passage through their disciplinary learning. These discipline-specific thoughts can be both conscious and subconscious but they tend to be limited in their scope – focussing on the story of how one individual became an expert in one particular aspect of one particular discipline. Further, the philosophical underpinnings of pedagogy are often individual and disciplinary rather than institutional or universal.

Being a lecturer in the 'supercomplexity' (Barnett, 2000) of a modern university is much more than just being a scholar within a certain field. To understand what it means to be a lecturer involves problematising how we might conceptualise learning; examining what we think education is for; questioning our own identity as academics, and situating ourselves within the modern world. Here I try to make sense of the academic environment through what Bourdieu (1984) calls 'exoticising the domestic' – where things that are taken to be common place or regular activities are examined afresh. Doing so allows the significance of everyday academic roles and identities to be examined in relation to the space in which Higher Education takes place.

As well as engaging with the knowledge base, lecturers may have learned the methods, modes and practices of their subject in a number of ways: this may have happened through their own studies; through practical experiences; through personal reflection, or through some blend of these. For some, their pedagogical approach has been carefully constructed through scrutiny of educational theory; critical reading of educational literature, and reflective practice. Many develop their practice by studying

towards formal qualifications such as a Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education. But there are also a great many lecturers in Higher Education who developed their practice tacitly and built their understanding of their role through direct on-the-job experience. No matter which route individuals have taken to arrive at the place called 'lecturer' it is their destination that sets out the requirements of their role. These requirements are often outlined in job descriptions but the tasks undertaken by a lecturer can also be rather nebulous and difficult to capture. Once we begin to exoticise the domestic we begin to capture what it is to do the work of a lecturer and, from this position, start to problematise the rationale for our activities.

Becoming a lecturer and doing the work of lecturing are not only personally negotiated experiences. If lecturers take different journeys then they will be differently tainted by their experiences but working within a shared institutional system tends to have a normative effect. Foucault (1986:23) suggests that 'we live inside a set of relations' therefore any discussion of meaning and any interpretation of what a lecturer might be also needs to consider communicated norms within the context of Higher Education. These norms are the result of, amongst other things, governmental and institutional directives; student expectations; graduate outcomes; departmental and disciplinary cultures, and the various needs of the various stakeholders.

A rose by any other name

Say the word 'lecturer' you might get a mental picture of what you think teachers in Higher Education look like, you might even get a picture of how they dress; how they act, and what they do. Most people can create their own definition of a lecturer - though these definitions are often narrow and prejudiced by personal experience. However language can change its meaning according to its application in a specific context and the 'game' being played with the language, therefore the meaning of the word 'lecturer' is likely to depend on who is using the word and the specific conditions in which they find themselves. In his analysis of private and public language, Wittgenstein (1953:§293) tells of two boys – each with a matchbox containing what he calls a 'beetle'. They agree never to look inside each other's matchbox and also agree that they both contain a beetle. In this analogy we see that the thing that is a 'beetle' is private to each boy but that the term only has meaning through its public use. It does not actually matter what is in the box and the word 'beetle' now means 'the thing inside the box'. In a similar way individuals (lecturers, students and the public at large) discuss the thing inside their head that they call 'lecturer' (their beetle).

Language is also context-bound: the context of Wittgenstein's example was a game played by two boys but two zoologists working in the tropical rain forest of Trinidad and Tobago would play a different 'game' and have a different understanding of 'beetle'. From this we can see that the word 'lecturer' has a private meaning but that it can only make

sense if others share a similar understanding of the word – in this way, language is private-shared and no one person can decide on the ‘true’ meaning of any term. Here we find that, whilst we might all have our own different versions of meaning, these various ‘meanings’ are often not so different and can overlap with the meanings of others. This vast Venn diagram of meaning then holds a practical truth of what a lecturer is at its middle – where there is broad agreement (even if this agreed definition is hard to conceptualise or verbalise).

What is the point of Higher Education?

As well as attempting to conceptualise their own role within a Higher Education institution, lecturers might also take a step back and examine what they see as the purpose of Higher Education. Some might consider their role to be focussed on the transmission of knowledge; some might see themselves as the co-creators of knowledge, and others will have a less formulated conception. Many people assume they know what the word ‘education’ means and what ‘education’ is, but are we all sharing the same definition or is this another beetle in another box?

Different schools of thought have sprung up concerning education. Two of these schools can be defined as the Traditional school and the Progressive school. Traditionalists believe that education should be about teaching for specific/extrinsic aims, often concerned with an individual’s function or role in society. The Traditional school of education has all the desks facing front, all the students in silence and the lecturer instructing them. In Traditional education students are taught answers not processes. In the Traditional school students raise their hands to answer questions not to ask them. Traditional education is about raising individuals who will fit into society and work for the common good. However, Progressive thinkers believe that education should be about enlightenment. Here education has broad aims and is intrinsically worthwhile. Progressive education is connected to self-development, self-fulfilment, self-actualisation and ‘ideas of person’. Progressive education is about allowing students to grow and meet their ‘true’ potential.

Both systems have positives and negatives. Progressive education is positive in that it develops systems of thought that are open-ended and personal – but if we encourage people to think for themselves then we must be ready for them to draw all sorts of conclusions. Traditional education is sometimes looked down on, as it seems to focus on developing systems of doing. It is about routine and can even lead to ‘boredom’ but on the other hand Traditional education is less likely to be corrupted by ideals and is more likely to lead to student employment.

Beyond all this, we might wish to consider what our students want. Attending university to learn to be a lawyer, film-maker or economist might involve some ‘narrow’ activity where key skills and first principles are taught, and many students appreciate this tangible learning. Others might want something a little more stretching and feel inspired to grow as thinkers. The



truth is probably somewhere in between – students will learn facts, figures, theories and formulas but they will also develop critical thinking skills and, in doing so, they will become more employable. So one of the jobs of the Higher Education lecturer is to support all this development rather than try to impose their own epistemological perspective. Part of being a lecturer, therefore, is personally negotiating what Higher Education is; negotiating what others might think Higher Education is, and learning to position yourself in this context

The blurring of academic roles

If attempting to find sense in this balance between meaning, perspective, politics and one’s own place in history is not hard enough, then we might also consider that jobs undertaken by lecturers are not fixed commodities. Kinser (2015) discusses how the various aspects that make up the perceived academic role have been ‘unbundled’ in the modern university, so that tasks that once belonged together and were the responsibility of one lecturer have now been split up and passed out to people who have more expertise in particular fields. Among the drivers of this fragmentation are the rapidly-changing workforce demographics; the repurposing of certain Higher Education institutions, and a movement to more hybrid forms of teaching, learning and research (Coates & Goedegbuure, 2012). Therefore academic institutions have had to refocus and notions of academic task have had to be re-thought.

The university is not one unified body, rather it is made up of academic tribes and territories (Becher & Trowler, 2001). With the unbundling of professional roles there can no longer be a simple binary division of academic and non-academic role, instead lecturers are left with roles that are blurry around the edges. In navigating their way through this new environment, lecturers find that their job roles are contested rather than affixed.





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Where lecturers were once expected to perform all aspects of academic practice, there has now been a movement to displace these all-rounders with professional staff who specialise in a particular aspect of the academic role (Blair, 2018). We can see this in the division of the university workforce and the growing number of colleagues who have roles that focus on one particular aspect of the three key aspects of Higher Education: teaching, research and service. For some, this trinity was always a matter of tension as they tried to navigate three positions that they did not feel equally comfortable in and the segregation of role has allowed them to focus on areas of particular strength. For others, this division has been seen as a weakening of their academic autonomy. Some see lecturing as teaching; some see lecturing as the creation and transmission of knowledge, and some have a more complicated personal understanding of the role – all have a preference whether conceptualised, espoused or enacted.

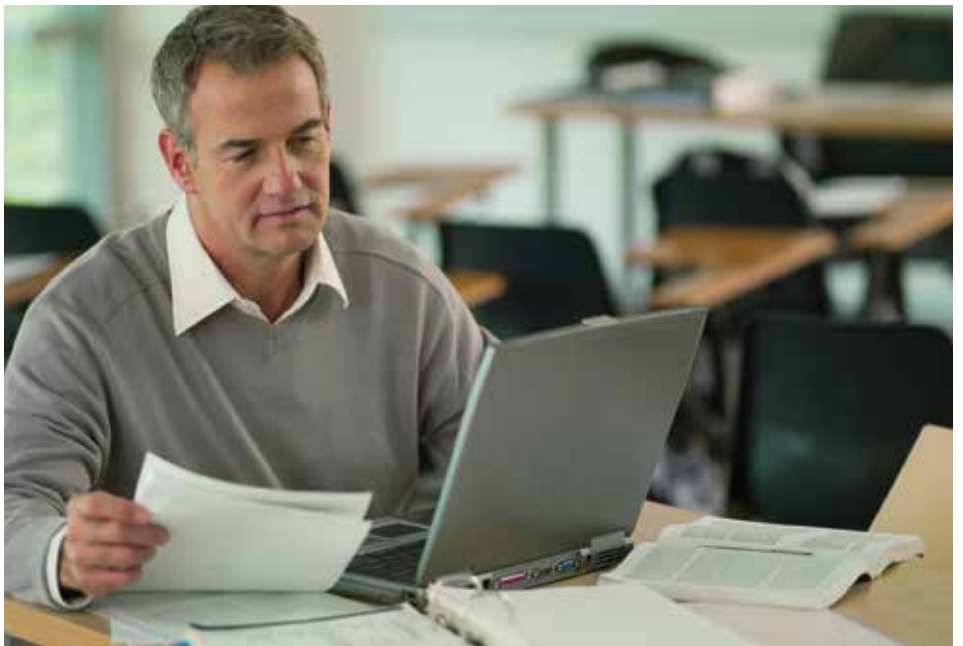
Academia is a contested territory that entails constant struggles over the symbols and boundaries of authenticity... In other words, questions of authenticity and legitimacy are central to the formation of social relations within the academy – with individuals and groups competing to ensure that their particular interests, characteristics and identities are accorded recognition and value (Archer, 2008, p.386).

What do lecturers do?

New iterations of institutional structures and the uncertainty of academic identity have led to a 'disruption of expectation and inconsistencies in the personal projects of academic staff' (Elkington & Lawrence, 2012, p. 59). The blurring of roles and the unbundling of academic practice may have given rise to a feeling of personal insignificance and a sense of disengagement (Briggs, 2005) as blurred boundaries and a reconfiguration of institutional and academic norms leave lecturers without a distinctive and easily definable role. Macfarlane (2011) considers the unbundling of lecturing practice to be damaging to the established wisdom of what it means to be an academic and reports that this unbundling has led to a 'two-directional flow of professional support and academic staff into new para-academic roles' (p.63). In practice, this means that the tasks undertaken by one lecturer in one institution may be divided and shared amongst the professional and academic staff in another. This might also occur within an institution – leaving job roles 'similar but different' depending on departmental needs.

With fluidity in the field of Higher Education; multiple interpretations of what education might be; personally negotiated definitions, and inconsistencies in what universities are for, the task of 'being' a lecturer has become harder to categorise. The function of the modern university exists in a state

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of flux – affected by, inter alia, finance and funding, government policy, employer desire and student expectations. This movement had led to ambiguity within university lecturing roles – roles that are now locally rather than globally defined. Academic work has historically involved teaching, research and service. But under each of these headings lie a multitude of tasks that range from administration to revenue-raising. Such a breadth of activity means that it is hard for one lecturer to truly understand their role – let alone for there to be a common conception of academic activity and academic identity. Trying to get a handle on what lecturers actually do has, over time, become more difficult and, in recent years, conceptions of academic identities have become more complex, more ambiguous and more fragmented. With this, the tripartite identity (teaching, research and service) has started to fragment. So, if we once knew what lecturers did (and this is debated), we now have a less clear image of what is involved in academic work.

When we ask, “What is a lecturer?” we might initially develop a list of some of the tasks that lecturers undertake. But this is a weak model of understanding. We may have become complacent and started to simply assume that we understand what it is to be a lecturer. Exoticising the domestic offers us the opportunity to problematise our individual journey through Higher Education and our individual perspectives on Higher Education. The super-complicated, multi-modal fluidity of Higher Education means that we cannot truly become a lecturer. Instead we are constantly involved in the process of *becoming* a lecturer – a process that involves our own understanding of the world and interacting with the expectations of others. We each have a beetle that we each call ‘lecturer’. Instead of negotiating to find the universal definition of what a lecturer is, we, first of all, need to open the box and take time to examine our own meaning.

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